
Brian Wilson and Liv Yoon
School of Kinesiology, The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada

This article introduces/rationalizes an attempt to conceptualize “environmental sports journalism (ESJ).” ESJ refers to a set of principles for analyzing and/or reporting on media coverage of sport-related environmental issues—principles intended to support/promote dialogue and nuanced thinking about these issues and about how sports journalism might contribute to environmentally friendly and just outcomes. To clarify features of ESJ and explore benefits/challenges of ESJ, we include illustrative examples of ESJ from media coverage of: (a) polluted harbor water used for the 2016 Rio Olympic and Paralympic Summer Games and (b) the razing of an ancient forest for a ski facility for the 2018 PyeongChang Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games. We conclude with reflections on the potential/limits of ESJ and suggestions for work on sport, journalism, and environmental issues.

In this paper, we introduce and rationalize our attempt to conceptualize what we call “environmental sports journalism” or “ESJ,” as we define it, refers to a set of principles for analyzing and/or reporting on media coverage of sport-related environmental issues—principles intended to support/promote dialogue and nuanced thinking about these issues and about how sports journalism might contribute to environmentally friendly and just outcomes. Our development of the ESJ principles outlined herein was informed by: (a) existing research and conceptual work in the “environmental journalism” (EJ) and science communication subfields—work that focuses on best practices for communicating about environmental issues, (b) writing in the field of journalism studies that is concerned more broadly with criteria for assessing “what counts” as excellent journalism in democratic societies, and (c) research by scholars in sport studies subfields (especially the sociology of sport, but including sport communication and sport management) that interrogates sport’s various relationships with the environment and environmental issues—with particular consideration of the range of responses by those in sport-related industries to these issues and the assumptions that underlie these responses.

Our hope in developing and elaborating on these principles is to contribute to thinking about the potential value of a framework (i.e., the ESJ framework) that could guide future sociological analyses of media coverage of sport-related environmental issues as well as the practice of covering sport-related environmental issues—all the while acknowledging existing tensions surrounding the use of normative and (in some respects) prescriptive frameworks for the purposes of advocating for particular kinds of journalism (Doll & Moy, 2022). As a way of clarifying what ESJ “looks like” and further exploring some benefits and challenges of adopting the approach, we offer illustrative examples of ESJ that are drawn from our research into mainstream media coverage of environmental controversies related to two recent sport mega-events: (a) polluted harbor water that was used for events held as part of the 2016 Rio Olympic and Paralympic Summer Games and (b) the razing of an ancient forest for a ski facility for the 2018 PyeongChang Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games (Yoon & Wilson, 2019). Specifically, we discuss how we see the proposed ESJ principles to be reflected in a set of excerpts from a diverse set of articles written about these environmental controversies and, in doing so, also highlight features of ESJ that are especially applicable to environmental controversies commonly associated with sport mega-events. While the excerpts from these articles should not be seen as “representative” of the kinds of excerpts one would most often encounter in journalistic work on sport and environmental issues (see Yoon & Wilson, 2019), the aim is to demonstrate what a form of “best practice” sport-related EJ “looks like”—which we suggest and hope would have analytic and pedagogical value.

This paper should be seen as part of a much broader and multifaceted response to the existential threat of climate change (and related environmental dangers) to our planet. This includes our planet’s ecosystems and its human and nonhuman inhabitants. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Working Group II Co-Chair Hans-Otto Pörtner notes that the “scientific evidence is unequivocal: climate change is a threat to human well-being and the health of the planet” while asserting that “any further delay in concerted global action will miss a brief and rapidly closing window to secure a livable future” (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022). It has been convincingly argued that if global warming is not kept below 1.5 °C that water...
shortages, food scarcities, extreme weather conditions, and other related consequences are likely (Hoegh-Guldberg et al., 2018; Romm, 2022). The World Health Organization states that between 2030 and 2050, climate change is expected to cause approximately 250,000 additional deaths per year, from malnutrition, malaria, diarrhea, and heat stress (World Health Organization, 2021). This paper is intended to contribute to the wider response to these issues through an attempt to improve analyses of, and the practice of, one aspect of environmental communication (see Hansen & Cox, 2015)—sports journalism.

Assumptions and Contributions

The arguments we make in this paper are underpinned by three key assumptions. The first assumption is that there is immense value in highlighting what “best practice” forms of sport-related journalism look like when it comes to coverage of sport-related social and environmental issues. One of us has elsewhere argued in this vein that it would be beneficial for journalists covering conflict and violence in sport to draw on principles that underlie what is known as the “peace journalism” framework (Wilson & van Luijk, 2019; see also Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005). The crux of the argument in that case, for adopting what was termed a “sport journalism for peace” approach, is that there is value in integrating specialized knowledge associated with peace promotion and conflict transformation with approaches to reporting on and studying peace, conflict, and violence in sport-related media (Wilson & van Luijk, 2019). Pate and Hardin (2013) and Antunovic and Bundon (2022) have made similar arguments and contributions in relation to media coverage around athletes with disabilities.

We suggest here that an analogous rationale applies to thinking about best practice coverage of environmental concerns with respect to sport. The proposed ESJ approach is based on the idea that when journalists cover environmental issues rigorously and responsibly, informed by specialized knowledge about sport-related environmental issues, the resultant articles may inspire dialogue and nuanced thinking about sport-related environmental issues—and, ideally, inspire pro-environment structural and behavior changes that lead to pro-environment outcomes. This argument follows suggestions made by scholars who highlight the need for additional research concerned with “what counts” as best practice pro-environment journalism (what is sometimes known as “environmental journalism” or “EJ”; see Bourassa et al., 2013; Sachman & Valenti, 2020b), and others still who advocate more generally for journalism that is better informed by the work of specialists in relevant cognate fields—what Patterson (2013) calls “knowledge-based journalism.”

Relatedly, but with specific relevance to the study of sport journalism in the sociology of sport field, by highlighting “aspirational features” of sport media coverage, we hope also to build on the wealth of important studies conducted by sociologists of sport and others that have documented the range of problems commonly seen in sport journalism. We suggest that the current paper is a notable contribution in this area in light of previous research showing that in sociology of sport journals over the past several years, critiques of journalistic coverage of sport are only sometimes accompanied by examples of “best practice”—and that there is value in featuring such examples (Weedon et al., 2018).

We also see our proposal for an ESJ approach to be timely and of potential importance in light of observations in previous research (see Yoon & Wilson, 2019) that coverage of sport-related environmental issues in the mainstream press (“best practice,” or otherwise) is a topic that has been left relatively unexplored by sport scholars. This observation is akin to one made recently by Hutchins et al. (2021), who noted a scarcity of research on sport communication and environmental issues more broadly—and, in turn, challenged researchers and others “to imagine what a post-carbon media sports cultural complex looks like, and to assess how media sport might contribute to a fundamental transformation in the resource and energy foundations of global society” (p. 369). Complementing the growing body of research in the sociology of sport and sport management concerned with corporate environmental responsibility campaigns/communications and their impacts (see Casper et al., 2020; johnson & Ali, 2018; Kim, 2019; Kim & Chung, 2018; Millington & Wilson, 2013, 2016; Wilson & Millington, 2013), the analytic approach outlined in this paper—concerned especially with sport journalism—should be seen as a response to this important call.

A second key assumption that underlies this paper is that attending to how sport-related environmental issues are covered is of immense importance. We say this is of immense importance because, as sport scholars across various subfields have demonstrated over time (although less commonly with environmental issues in mind)—sport is a cultural form where broader environmental and social concerns are reflected (e.g., where the impacts of climate change and related problems can be observed, as warming patterns impact both winter and summer sport events—and where the impacts of sport-related human activity on the environment, like long-distance travel to sport venues, can be seen too) (see Bunds & Casper, 2018; Karamichas, 2013; Orr et al., 2022; Scott et al., 2019; and many others). On this basis, one of us has elsewhere described sport as an “indicator practice in a time of environmental crisis” (Wilson & Millington, 2020, p. 5). Put simply then, coverage of sport “matters” for what it can tell us not only about sport itself, but also about issues that transcend sport—like climate change, pollution, and ecosystem degradation.

In addition, and of particular importance in this context, is that sport is also a cultural form that attracts audiences that may not be as engaged with non-sport-related coverage of key societal issues—and that sport can sometimes be leveraged to attain environmental objectives (McLeod et al., 2018). Therefore, there is unique pedagogical potential in sport coverage for engaging audiences that may not be reachable elsewhere in the realm of mainstream media. Rowe (2007) has described this unique potential for sport journalism especially—and how this potential is often “squandered”:

[An unprecedented opportunity to diversify and deepen [sports journalism’s] remit occasioned by its expansion and heightened cultural resonance is seemingly being squandered by an excessively close integration with the sports industry, a lack of critical ambition, and an unimaginative reliance on socially and politically de-contextualized preview, description, and retrospection regarding sports events. (p. 400)]

It is worth noting here too that structural threats to “quality” journalism more generally, outside the sport realm, have only deepened since Rowe’s writing on this in 2007 (see Gasher et al., 2016), and sport journalism is certainly not immune to this—although sport and sport media’s unique qualities offer some notable buffers to these problems (see Hutchins & Rowe, 2012).

A third key assumption underlying this paper is that sport mega-events especially can act as important sites for both investigating how sport-related environmental issues are reported on, as well as for considering how these issues might (ideally) be covered by journalists. We build here on arguments that underlie the work of Wenner and Billings (2017) and others concerning the media- tization of sport mega-events. This work is especially useful for
demonstrating how sport mega-events—events that bridge sport with urban and global political issues (e.g., inequities in relation to housing and transportation; corruption and urban policy development), social movements, environmental issues, Indigenous issues, and so much more—offer a particularly powerful reference point for those interested in studying and illuminating “the interrelation between changes in media and communications on the one hand, and changes in culture and society on the other” (Coulrdry & Hepp, 2013, p. 197). As we will discuss below, sport mega-events have also been at the center of tensions over time about how sport impacts the environment, and as a result, particular attention has been paid to how sport managers and organizers have responded to these issues. Following this, we suggest that there is immense value too in engaging with questions about “what is possible” for socially and environmentally concerned journalists in the current media environment—and that exploring reporting practices around sport mega-events, informed by sociological thinking on these topics, also offers a uniquely fruitful way of doing this.

Structure of Paper

With the aim of contextualizing, outlining and justifying our proposal for an ESJ approach, we have structured this paper as follows. First, we provide background for our argument that attending to “best practice” cases of ESJ is worthwhile. Included here is a (necessarily abbreviated) discussion about sport and environment issues more generally—that is, what these issues are, and how some groups have responded to these issues. This is followed by an introduction to the notion of EJ, and then an outline of what we mean by ESJ.

Our discussion of ESJ itself includes an overview of the principles and features of ESJ, along with an overview of the strategies we used when deciding on what these principles and features should be. We then provide examples of ESJ to help clarify these principles and features, and also to show “what is possible” when it comes to excellent coverage of sport-related environmental issues. We conclude this paper with reflections on the potential and limits of ESJ, and recommendations for further research and practical engagement with respect to pro-environment sport-related journalism.

Literature Review

Sport and Environmental Issues

Sport-related environmental issues have become widely recognized in academia, mainstream media, and among many sports organizations themselves (Wilson & Millington, 2020). These issues can be grouped into two separate, but highly interrelated, categories. We engage with these categories in the following two sections—while noting here at the outset that these summaries are necessarily succinct due to our particular focus in this paper on media coverage and journalistic practice in relation to these issues.

Category 1: How Environmental Issues Are Impacting (and Could Impact) Sport

The first category pertains to how environmental issues are now impacting sport, and how they might impact sport into the future (Orr & Inoue, 2019). Included here are concerns about ways that increasingly warmer climates will impact ski seasons, the impacts of polluted air and water on the health of athletes, impacts of heat waves on athletes’ abilities to safely train and compete, how rising water levels may impact coastal sports, and the impacts of droughts on golf course maintenance (see Bunds & Casper, 2018; Goldblatt, 2020). Among the most well-known of the studies on these topics is Scott et al.’s (2019) research concerning the future of the Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games with respect to a range of projected climate change scenarios. Relevant here too is Norman et al.’s (2020) research that included recollections by Elders of the Fisher River Cree Nation (an Indigenous nation in Manitoba, Canada) of river-related physical cultural activities—before the impacts of pollution from upstream farms made such practices unviable. Orr et al.’s (2022) recent scoping review of studies on the impacts of climate change on sport offers a wide-ranging exploration of research in this area.

Category 2: How Sport Is Impacting the Environment

A second category of concern relates to the impacts of sport on the environment (see Bunds & Casper, 2018; Goldblatt, 2020; Wilson & Millington, 2020). We are referring here to a variety of issues that have been raised across a range of sports and venues. Included here are the impacts of modifications to lakes and rivers for paddling and canoeing—modifications known to, at times, impact and reduce wetland area, thus reducing breeding for birds, fish, and insects. Other concerns include the soil erosion and destruction of natural vegetation associated with alpine skiing and the pollution from driving to resorts (Stoddart, 2012). The implications of golf course construction and maintenance for natural habitats are also relevant here (Millington & Wilson, 2016).

Of course, and perhaps most well known, are the negative environmental legacies of some major sport events. We are referring here, for example, to the broader impacts of the construction of sport facilities (especially those that go under-used and/or those that are scrapped) and the waste and pollution in travel and during events (Karamichas, 2013; Kellison & Hong, 2015)—with air travel being commonly recognized as the most impactful activity associated with major sport events (Dolf & Teehan, 2015).

The Olympics and the Environment: Contributions and Contradictions

Responding to sometimes well-publicized concerns about the negative environmental legacies of some sport organizations and sport mega-events, some major sport organizations have begun in recent years to take environmental issues seriously. Among the best examples of this impact can be seen in the work of the International Olympic Committee (IOC)—a highly influential global sport organization that is commonly seen as a forerunner on environmental issues in this sector for integrating environmental issues and sustainability into their mission statement, as well as adding the environment as the third pillar of the Olympic Movement in 1994. Subsequent to these policy changes, bids to host the Olympics and Paralympics—that are vetted by the IOC—now include a (mandatory) comprehensive plan for mitigating environmental impacts. Hosts of the Games now regularly promote pro-environment activities they have carried out (and claim to have to carried out) (Karamichas, 2013; Yoon, 2020).

Although the Olympics and Paralympics have been associated with sustainability-related successes—most notably, the building of more environmentally and community-friendly transportation systems and sport facilities (see VanWynsberge, 2015)—there are complexities associated with this point. First of all, questions remain about whether a sport mega-event is, in fact, needed to leverage these benefits—although this suggestion does not undermine the idea that such events can lead to pro-social and
pro-environmental developments (Wilson, 2012a, 2012b; VanWynsberghe, 2015).

Second, serious concerns have been expressed about the “sustainability approach” that has been adopted by Olympic host cities to guide their efforts to be environmentally friendly (Glasson, 2022; Hayes & Horne, 2011). This approach, based on claims to balance economic, social, and environmental priorities, is known to be associated with a prioritization of economic and political aims over environmental aims in decision making (see Boykoff & Mascarenhas, 2016; Müller, 2015). Related concerns about attempts to maximize economic gains while attempting to mitigate environmental damage are evident in critical assessments of Olympic host cities’ common practice of purchasing carbon offsets as a way to mitigate excess sport event-related emissions—which organizers commonly do as a strategy of reaching “carbon neutral” status for their event (Wilson, 2012a, 2012b). For example, and as one of us (Wilson, 2012a, 2012b) has demonstrated elsewhere, there are well-documented difficulties when it comes to equating environmental destruction in one area and the funding of carbon-positive activities in another area in the world—a process that is fundamental to carbon offsetting schemes.

These critiques are aligned with broader concerns about approaches to addressing environmental problems that often rely unreflectively on the idea that economic progress and pro-environmental activity necessarily go hand in hand (Johnson & Ali, 2018; Kim, 2019; Millington et al., 2018; Wilson & Millington, 2020). These and related concerns underlie the commonly posed overarching question about “how green the Games really are,” and whether claims about environmental friendliness by sport-related corporations and event organizers are overstated when considered alongside actual pro-environment activities (Miller, 2017).

Environment-Related Inequities and Sport Mega-Events

It is also well known that the benefits of hosting the Olympics are unevenly distributed (Kennelly, 2016). It is, however, only fairly recently that the kinds of inequities that are especially relevant to environmental issues—sport-related and otherwise—have been foregrounded in social sciences research (see Young, 2015). We are referring here to, first, intergenerational inequities—which includes a recognition of how long-term damage to the environment carried out by current generations will be impactful for future generations. We are also referring to intragenerational inequities—which is the kind most often explored in research, and along a range of axes. This includes inequities across social classes, and a recognition generally that those with the fewest resources and marginalized groups known to experience forms discrimination and exclusion (e.g., members of racialized groups, persons with disabilities, older persons) commonly encounter more barriers when it comes to dealing with environment-related issues, such as climate-related disasters. Finally, those concerned with inequity and the environment are increasingly highlighting the immense inequities that exist between humans and nonhumans, recognizing how human-driven decisions impact broader ecosystems and the flora and fauna of our world (Millington & Wilson, 2017; Wilson & Millington, 2020).

All of these issues are, of course, relevant to how journalists report on sport mega-events—and especially to thinking about how particular tensions and successes pertaining to environmental issues are framed. What we have outlined in this section could be considered an example of the kind of “specialized knowledge” that we suggest is a necessary part of the ESJ we describe later—recognizing that this is just a subset of what might be helpful for journalists reporting on particular sport-related environmental issues, and that context-specific concerns will arise during such reporting too.

Sport, Communication, and Environmental Issues

As noted in the introduction to this paper, there is a small but growing body of research concerned with sport-related communication that pertains to environmental issues and inequities—and, quite recently, an agenda has been laid out for developing this area of study. We are referring here to a recent chapter by Hutchins et al. (2021) concerned with “greening sport media.” In this chapter, the authors assert that the greening of sport media requires an understanding of environment-related communications from: sport teams, clubs, leagues, and associations; major sport events and tournaments; sport stadiums and venues; athletes, nongovernmental organizations, campaign-based groups, and activists; and equipment/apparel producers. Hutchins et al. (2021) also recommend attending to “the environmental impact of the technologies used to communicate media sport to audiences and users” (Hutchins et al., 2021, pp. 375–378).

By offering this summary of key areas pertinent to “greening sport media,” Hutchins et al. (2021) have set an agenda worth following—and also worth revising as research increases across these areas. Specifically, we suggest that in light of journalism’s historical mandate in democratic societies for disseminating informed and balanced coverage (see McNair, 2012; Romano, 2010; Strömback, 2005)—and investigating stories with societal relevance that pertain to political accountability—that journalism has an especially crucial and wide-ranging role to play in environmental communication. For this reason, we see the focus of this paper on sport-related journalism and the environment as being an essential complement to the lines of research on sport, communication, and environmental issues outlined by Hutchins et al. (2021). Although we have noted the need for greater research and sociological attention to sport-related reporting on environmental issues elsewhere (see Yoon & Wilson, 2019) the current paper is our first attempt to fully articulate and justify a set of ESJ principles.

A Case for Environmental (Sports) Journalism

In the remainder of this paper, we elaborate on the important role that journalists do play and might play in communicating important and influential messages that may make a positive difference on environmental issues—and how an analytic approach (i.e., ESJ) intended to inform sociological research and (ideally) sport journalism itself might serve as a useful offering in this context (see earlier for an outline of these intended contributions). We make this argument cognizant of the commercial motives associated with contemporary journalism—including the range of interpersonal, organizational, and structural influences associated with media production that are known to interfere with journalistic integrity (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996) and, for sport journalism specifically, the history of “boosterism” that has also been known to compromise the quality of sport journalism’s coverage of “serious” issues (Rowe, 2007). Also relevant in this context are influential arguments offered by Bennett (2016) concerning the ‘information biases’ commonly seen in press coverage of key issues that are thought to hinder the media’s potential to advance democracy. These biases include personalization (i.e., coverage that downplays broader social and political issues in favor of stories that feature the tragedies and triumphs of people—stories that may only superficially connect to the issues); dramatization (i.e., coverage that emphasizes conflicts between personalities...
and the impacts of issues in the present moment—instead of measured attention to historical context, future implications and broader political significance); and fragmentation (when stories on particular issues are not connected to one another thematically—meaning, for example, that disconcerting events might be seen as taking place in isolation, when this is not the case).

While remaining attentive to these ongoing concerns, this paper works from the assumption that quality journalism, including sport journalism, remains a cornerstone of well-functioning democracies and that there is immense value in exploring ways that it can continue to serve this role, and do so more effectively, despite these issues and in the face of these issues (Pickard, 2019).

As a precursor to outlining principles for ESI, it is of course necessary to first outline what is meant by EJ. Over time, the meaning of EJ has evolved and taken on different inflections—recognizing that the types of environment-related issues that are considered most pressing have changed over time, and also that various groups (i.e., scientists, environmentalists, and politicians, as well as journalists, and others) often have distinct preferences for and understandings of how these issues are best portrayed (Giaounlis et al., 2010; Neuzil, 2020).

According to the Society of Environmental Journalists (2019)—an association of professional journalists dedicated to more and better coverage of environment-related issues—EJ refers to “credible [i.e., convincing and compelling] and robust [i.e., rigorous and well-researched] journalism that informs and engages society on environmental issues.” While it is fair to suggest that what it means to do “credible and robust” and “informative and engaging” journalism concerned with environmental issues is open to interpretation—and certainly looks like the recent Routledge Handbook of Environmental Journalism (Sachsman & Valenti, 2020b) include a range of examples of what doing environmentalism journalism means to a range of authors studying how different environmental issues around the world are reported on in the press—this should not be taken to mean that there are not some criteria that might be discerned from these studies.

Having said this, from our read of the literature on the topic, the best way we might define criteria for quality—in light of the wealth of critique that exists on coverage of environmental issues—is in relation to concerns that have been identified about how environmental issues have been covered in media. Our point here aligns with one offered by Bourassa et al. (2013), who asserted, based on their meta-analysis of academic reviews of media coverage of environmental issues, that

the literature . . . claims [that] traditional journalistic norms used in environment reporting are not adequate and it is up to educators and journalism training to respond to the common criticisms of environment[a] journalism; how exactly to do this, however, remains largely unanswered. (italics added, Bourassa et al., 2013, p. 56)

As above, we might see what quality EJ looks like from “what it is not” (see Bourassa et al., 2013). We discuss in more detail the criteria we have identified on this basis in the next section, but refer here to some overarching concerns that have been identified by those studying press coverage of environmental issues:

• a lack of background research in and context for environmental stories—and, therefore, overly simplified portrayals of environmental issues (Friedman, 2004; Wyss, 2018);
• excessive reliance on official sources (Miller & Riechert, 2000); and
• dependence on public relations releases from corporations and other organizations about their environmental work, not investigative journalism (Hansen, 2011).

Underlying each of these concerns are questions about the “framing” of environmental issues—which refers here to decisions that journalists make about what issues to foreground, whose voices to foreground, what sources to use, and especially what contextual information is considered to be most relevant and worthy of inclusion (see Entman et al., 2009). While studies of framing are of course highly interpretive—as not all readers of texts will focus on and make sense of the same parts of texts in the same or predictable ways—an awareness of the common issues around coverage of environmental issues is important for considering what messages are most prominent, and why important issues pertinent to environmental stories would likely be “missed” by readers in some cases.

It is also important to note that not everyone agrees that EJ is a “good thing.” Some suggest that being an environmental journalist—because of its association with being subjectively concerned about environmental issues—puts one at risk of being “one-sided,” and not “objective” when covering these issues, and thus compromising journalistic rigor (Tong, 2015). Others taking this position suggest that journalists should avoid appearing “biased” toward pro-environment stances and instead should commit only to covering environmental issues—while withholding judgment about how important environmental issues are, or how they should be approached (Tong, 2015).

Of course, many environmental journalists and others disagree, suggesting that one can be “objective” (i.e., impartial and dispassionate when assessing evidence and information) and at the same time be an advocate for pro-environment positions—and that taking these sorts of stances is necessary for journalists interested in doing journalism intended to support the public good. This is the position taken by the environmental journalists interviewed for a 2015 study by Tong—who “do not equate ‘being objective’ with the complete detachment of their subjective opinions from the facts in their reports” (Tong, 2015, pp. 756–757). Put another way, these journalists felt a responsibility to weigh evidence and offer an interpretation for the reader—while at the same time continuing to highlight why environmental issues are important. From this perspective, “quality” coverage of environmental issues—which may purposely or inadvertently act as a form of environmental advocacy—aligns well with features of “quality journalism” more generally. We agree with this position, and see this view of EJ as foundational for the argument for ESJ principles in this paper—and for our suggested approach to reporting that privileges credible and robust reporting alongside a transparent subjective commitment to (sports) journalism that informs and engages society on environmental issues, guided by the set of principles outlined below.

**Seven Principles for “ESJ”: Background and Discussion of Principles**

As noted above, we devised principles/criteria for ESJ that in many cases we saw as a response to identified problems with coverage of environmental issues in media. While our suggestions were most influenced by EJ literature, we were attentive too to suggestions offered by Rögener and Wormer (2017) from their study of what expert science journalists considered as necessary for “good environmental journalism” (i.e., journalism that is mostly likely to lead to enriched and nuanced understandings of environmental issues and pro-environment action). Criteria noted by Rögener and
Wormer (2017) included: avoiding “scaremongering” about environmental issues; transparency about sources for articles; highlighting potential solutions to problems and concrete action strategies; attention to how local, regional, and global (geographical) dimensions are pertinent to the case; and accounting for the temporal scale associated with environmental issues. Complementing Rögener and Wormer’s (2017) findings about “avoiding scaremongering” is research by scholars like Ojala (2012, 2015) working in the environmental education field, who note associations between “feeling hopeful” and being motivated for pro-environment action. Ojala (2012) explained (drawing on Courville & Piper, 2004 and McGeer, 2004) how the “emotional character of the hope concept is a strong motivational force which gives energy to act even in the absence of certainties” (p. 627). Although the particular mechanisms at play around the role of hope may not be entirely clear, we suggest in light of what is known about the importance of affect and emotion (whether this be associated with feeling hopeful or another emotion, like feeling angry) for inspiring action through social movements (see Jasper, 1998) that integrating hopeful messages into environmental (sports) journalism—especially as an antidote to the problems associated scaremongering—is worthwhile and potentially important for pro-environment action, for some audiences at least.

An important caveat to Ojala’s (2012, 2015) research, with pertinence to ESJ too, is that “hope” is not related to pro-environment action when the hope is based on “denial” of environmental problems (i.e., hope that warnings about climate change are based on faulty science, despite extremely strong evidence to the contrary)—which is to say, highlighting “hope” for progress on environmental issues only “works” if accompanied by balanced, highly contextualized, rigorously researched and evidence-based reporting that also, ideally, includes references to concrete and proven pro-environment action strategies. It will become evident, below, how the principles pertaining to hope, context, and rigorous evidence-based reporting are best understood as highly interrelated in the ESJ approach.

Finally, we accounted earlier in this paper for the range of issues and (in)equities that were shown to be central to the case; and accounting for the temporal scale associated with environmental issues. While this is most obvious in relation to Principle 2 that refers to the importance of featuring the lives and voices of local and marginalized people, it is equally applicable to Principle 3 that concerns interspecies inequity and the need to be sensitive to nonhuman issues and interrelationships between humans and nonhumans when responding to environmental issues.

Principle 4, “journalism that questions taken-for-granted assumptions,” is intended to highlight instances when journalists point to assumptions that underlie claims of doing pro-environment work, including investigations into claims by mega-event organizers and others of “being sustainable.” As noted earlier, around sport as in other institutions, claims of doing pro-environment work are common—and we suggest that journalism that is attentive to the assumptions underlying such claims, and the potential problems with such claims, is what we would consider a form of ESJ.

Principle 4 directly relates to Principle 5’s call for journalism that “identifies alternatives to the status quo.” The point here is that unsettling assumptions associated with approaches to sustainable sport—assumptions that are known at times to favor more economistic-friendly versions of sustainability over more environment-friendly ones (Wilson & Millington, 2015)—would go hand in hand with identifying alternatives. Even if status quo approaches have proven to be effective in some ways, it is still preferable to highlight other strategies to demonstrate that there are, in fact, other options—including options that may not be underpinned by the assumption that holding a sport mega-event is inevitable, or that profit-seeking and progress on the environmental necessarily go hand in hand. Such an alternative might be as straightforward as “don’t hold a sport event at all” if it is known that environmental damage is inevitable when one is held—which of course diverges from the usual strategy of “being as environmentally-friendly as possible when holding an event” while presuming that an event will go ahead in any case.

Principle 6, “journalism that, in some ways, sometimes, takes a side, meaning that social and environmental justice are considered priorities,” emerged from the need for transparency in journalism—to the extent that transparency includes a recognition that the notion of being “neutral” or truly “objective” is a highly questionable proposition (as we all have a social position and perspective—and journalists, as a matter of practice, make choices about what to foreground, or not, in their writing). For this reason, we suggest here that journalists are being transparent when they in some way declare their position (see Post, 2015). Relatedly, and in keeping with principles of EJ and ESJ, the stated aim of doing journalistic work that is in the interest of public and ecological good is something that, in our view, is fully consistent with the role that journalism is intended to play in democratic societies (see also Romano, 2010).
Of course, the notion of ESJ that extends from EJ refers to journalistic considerations of the sometimes unique features of, and concerns that emerge and exist around, sport and sport mega-events—and the recognition that attending to social and environmental issues alongside the usual concerns of those reporting on sport is crucial (Rowe, 2007). It is these features of journalism that are more conventionally highlighted in discussions about quality journalism that we are referring to in Principle 7.

This final point is worth emphasizing because it is assumed in the ESJ model that general features of “excellent journalism”—including concerns with robustness and credibility (i.e., rigorous, wide-ranging, and context-sensitive journalism), an emphasis on effective/powerful storytelling, and a reliance on critical investigation (Shapiro, 2010)—remain key considerations when assessing journalistic quality. Bogart’s (2004) writing on language most often used in the journalism community to speak to journalistic quality—such as “integrity, fairness, balance, accuracy, comprehensiveness, diligence of discovery, authority, breadth of coverage, variety of content, reflection of the entire home community, vivid writing, attractive makeup, packaging or appearance, and easy navigability” (Bogart, 2004, p. 40)—offers a snapshot of some of these more commonly referred to attributes. Importantly, in Shapiro’s (2010) writing on the topic, he supplements Bogart’s list by identifying “benefit to society” as a feature of quality journalism (p. 148).

Principle 7 is therefore based on our suggestion that ESJ—just like other forms of prosocial and pro-environment journalism, like peace journalism (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005) and development journalism (Thussu, 2000)—might be seen as attempts to feature and enrich journalism’s mandate to “benefit societies,” to use Shapiro’s words.

Environmental Sport Journalism
in Practice: Sample of Articles and Approach
to Selecting “Best Practice” Excerpts

With this background, and as a way of highlighting what these principles of ESJ might look like in practice, we offer below: (a) a set of excerpts from articles in the press that dealt with sport and environment-related topics that are examples of what we see as aligning with one or more ESJ principles and (b) a brief discussion of what we see as the key ESJ-related features of the selected excerpts.

By taking this approach, we are acknowledging that within any one article there may be components/excerpts that align with ESJ—and other components/excerpts that may not align with ESJ. Even deciding “what counts” as ESJ (or not) is itself an often highly interpretive act. It is for this reason that in the following sections we have also attempted to be transparent about our interpretive process.

We recognize here, too, that deciding whether an article in its entirety is a good example of ESJ would require a more fine-grained content analysis of the article—an analysis that would include a focus not only on the extent to which features of ESJ are “present,” but also instances where features of ESJ sit alongside other features that we might see as “the opposite of ESJ.” While we see immense value in doing a more wide-ranging content analysis of this sort, we see the more conceptual and interpretive focus of this article as being a necessary precursor to such a study.

Where the Examples of ESJ Were Drawn From

The excerpts from articles, outlined below, that were considered to be examples of ESJ were selected strategically to demonstrate the range of principles associated with ESJ. They were in no way “representative” in any other sense—as we did not calculate, for example, “how many” examples of each feature of ESJ were present across the sample of articles, or focus on contextual factors concerning, for example, publication source, although such factors would be of central importance in studies intent on explaining trends/themes within datasets (e.g., Yoon & Wilson, 2019), which was not our aim here.

The excerpts were identified through close readings of articles collected for broader studies of media coverage of environmental issues pertinent to two sport mega-events. The first set of articles focused on the Rio 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Summer Games, and specifically on coverage of Guanabara Bay—where the Olympic sailing events were held. As will become evident, the selected articles concerned pre-Olympic promises to clean the Bay—promises that were not kept (as of the writing of the articles referred to here), as there continued to be an open flow of raw sewage into the Bay. Articles collected in this instance included English-language international print news articles between January 1, 2009 and July 31, 2016.

The second set of articles focused on the PyeongChang 2018 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games, and specifically on coverage of the razing of 58,000 trees on Mount Gariwang—a formerly “Protected Area for Forest Genetic Resource Conservation”—to enable the development of a downhill ski course. Articles between January 1, 2011 and December 31, 2015 were collected from 47 South Korean news media outlets and translated to English (see Yoon & Wilson, 2019).

Examples of ESJ: Excerpts and Explanations

“When Rio Fails, Sister City Shows Sewage Cleanup Possible”: Journalism That “Identifies Alternatives,” May Inspire Hope, and Includes Relevant and Rich Context

We begin with two excerpts from an article entitled “When Rio Fails, Sister City Shows Sewage Cleanup Possible,” written for the Associated Press by journalists Barchfield and Prengaman (2016). As with all excerpts outlined in this section, we saw in these excerpts features that aligned with one or more of the ESJ principles noted above. These particular excerpts that pertain to Guanabara Bay, pollution, and the 2016 Rio Games have features that align with Principle 5 especially (i.e., “journalism that offers some form of hope and identifies alternatives to the status quo”)—although we see features relevant to other principles as well, as we will discuss.

Here is the first chosen excerpt from the article:

. . . just across the Guanabara Bay from Rio, the sister city of Niteroi is showing that a real cleanup is possible . . . . Niteroi’s success underscores key factors that stand in stark contrast to Rio: privatization of sewage management, major investment in infrastructure and a high level of accountability and collaboration between the city government and the utility to define targets and meet them.

By pointing to the positive environmental record associated with Niteroi in this article—and especially to reasons for Niteroi’s success in this regard—readers are presented with both an alternative to the status quo in Rio and also evidence of “what is possible” in terms of environmental best practice. Also, by offering at least a
general pathway to success (i.e., by referring some of the strategies adopted within Niteroi to enable pro-environment work), we see the journalists who wrote the article to be fostering a form of “hope” that could lead to concrete action. The hopeful title of the article, which points to the idea that “sewage cleanup is possible” in a context that shares many political and geographical features with Rio, is notable here.

Another passage from this same article—a passage that, in our view, illuminates why the alternative approach to addressing environmental issues mentioned above would seem to be a viable choice—is worth noting too:

Global experts say that privatization is not always a solution. While historically public water utilities have tended to be hampered by inertia and slow to adopt new technologies, today some of the best sewage facilities in the world are public, said Kartik Chandran, a professor of engineering at Columbia University. He pointed to those serving New York City, Washington D.C., Los Angeles, and Seattle as leaders in the U.S., adding that stringent regulations and strict enforcement are the basis of success.

In this instance, the journalists offered a more nuanced engagement with the question of whether privatization is, in fact, the reason that the city of Niteroi has been successful with its pollution measures. The journalists also explore a more complex set of solutions to what is obviously a complex problem. In doing so, the journalists are also putting the problem into a broader context (see Principle 1) by referring to other cities that have done a good job addressing sewage-related issues. We see this also as an example of robust EJ.

Also, by featuring a quotation from Kartik Chandran, a professor of engineering at Columbia University who studies the topic at hand, an expert is being featured who would appear to have no vested interest in a positive (or negative) portrayal of the Games (see Principle 2). This is therefore an example of “balanced” coverage that does not feature only pro-Olympic elites.

Of course, there are always limits as to what, and how much, contextual information can be included in any article, and the range and number of quotations included. Nevertheless, and recognizing the limits that journalists work within (a point we return to in the conclusion to this paper), we are encouraged by the possibilities raised in these excerpts.

“POCOG Stubbornly Saying ‘Sharing Is Impossible’ Is Inappropriate”: Questioning Value Norms, Identifying Alternatives, and Acknowledges the Range of Stakeholders

The next example of ESJ comes from an article in Pressian by Kim (2015) entitled “PyeongChang Winter Olympics Should Consider Sharing Games.” The article focuses on the question of whether the environmental impacts of the PyeongChang Games in South Korea could have been reduced if some venues were shared with another country that already had usable venues, namely Japan. The key excerpt we feature here reads as follows:

“POCOG Stubbornly Saying ‘Sharing Is Impossible’ Is Inappropriate”: Questioning Value Norms, Identifying Alternatives, and Acknowledges the Range of Stakeholders

The next example of ESJ comes from an article in Pressian by Kim (2015) entitled “PyeongChang Winter Olympics Should Consider Sharing Games.” The article focuses on the question of whether the environmental impacts of the PyeongChang Games in South Korea could have been reduced if some venues were shared with another country that already had usable venues, namely Japan. The key excerpt we feature here reads as follows:

Green Korea claims, “Despite the changes in overall [IOC] rules that would allow sharing of the Games, POCOG [PyeongChang Organizing Committee for the 2018 Olympic & Paralympic Winter Games] stubbornly saying ‘sharing is impossible’ is inappropriate . . . . They need to have an open discussion with the rest of society about sharing the Games.”

With ESJ in mind, we suggest that an important characteristic of this article is that the perspective of an environmental activist group (i.e., Green Korea) is highlighted. This is notable (and in alignment with Principle 2), recognizing that voices from the political periphery are commonly marginalized—and key messages offered by these groups (when reported at all) are often not adequately explained (Arrington, 2017; Martin, 2004). Fortunately, there is evidence from more recent research that journalists are in some cases doing a comparatively better job in this regard—as demonstrated in Boykoff’s (2014) study of media coverage of protests around the London and Vancouver Olympic and Paralympic Games. Still, attending to inclusion in this context remains an important consideration.

We also highlight here that by featuring Green Korea’s questioning of the long-standing assumption that the Games should only be held in one country, this article features both a “challenge to value norms” (Principle 4) and “an alternative to the status quo” (Principle 5). Although the IOC now allows Games’ organizers to share venues across borders and has expressed an openness to this (Morris, 2021), that this has not happened suggests the importance of emphasizing the environment-related value of this alternative—and that featuring the suggestion that there be venue sharing is indeed still a challenge to the status quo.

“The Olympics Should Have Been a Lifeline for People Like Luis Fernando, but Authorities Have Failed to Deliver the Clean Up They Promised”: Lives and Voices of Locals/Marginalized

While the previous example featured the views of an often-marginalized stakeholder in the Games (i.e., an environmental activist group), the next example, found in coverage of the Rio Olympics through Channel NewsAsia—Rio de Janeiro (in an article by Powell, 2017), features not only a marginalized stakeholder, but also a stakeholder who lives and works in the locale where the environmental problem exists—and must deal with the issue day to day, including after the Games when the athletes have left. Also of note in the following excerpt is that the voice of a person in this local circumstance is featured (i.e., the person is quoted in the article, instead of only being “talked about” by the journalist or another commentator):

“POCOG Stubbornly Saying ‘Sharing Is Impossible’ Is Inappropriate”: Questioning Value Norms, Identifying Alternatives, and Acknowledges the Range of Stakeholders

The next example of ESJ comes from an article in Pressian by Kim (2015) entitled “PyeongChang Winter Olympics Should Consider Sharing Games.” The article focuses on the question of whether the environmental impacts of the PyeongChang Games in South Korea could have been reduced if some venues were shared with another country that already had usable venues, namely Japan. The key excerpt we feature here reads as follows:

Green Korea claims, “Despite the changes in overall [IOC] rules that would allow sharing of the Games, POCOG [PyeongChang Organizing Committee for the 2018 Olympic & Paralympic Winter Games] stubbornly saying ‘sharing is impossible’ is inappropriate . . . . They need to have an open discussion with the rest of society about sharing the Games.”

With ESJ in mind, we suggest that an important characteristic of this article is that the perspective of an environmental activist group (i.e., Green Korea) is highlighted. This is notable (and in alignment with Principle 2), recognizing that voices from the political periphery are commonly marginalized—and key messages offered by these groups (when reported at all) are often not adequately explained (Arrington, 2017; Martin, 2004). Fortunately, there is evidence from more recent research that journalists are in some cases doing a comparatively better job in this regard—as demonstrated in Boykoff’s (2014) study of media coverage of protests around the London and Vancouver Olympic and Paralympic Games. Still, attending to inclusion in this context remains an important consideration.

We also highlight here that by featuring Green Korea’s questioning of the long-standing assumption that the Games should only be held in one country, this article features both a “challenge to value norms” (Principle 4) and “an alternative to the status quo” (Principle 5). Although the IOC now allows Games’ organizers to share venues across borders and has expressed an openness to this (Morris, 2021), that this has not happened suggests the importance of emphasizing the environment-related value of this alternative—and that featuring the suggestion that there be venue sharing is indeed still a challenge to the status quo.

“The Olympics Should Have Been a Lifeline for People Like Luis Fernando, but Authorities Have Failed to Deliver the Clean Up They Promised”: Lives and Voices of Locals/Marginalized

While the previous example featured the views of an often-marginalized stakeholder in the Games (i.e., an environmental activist group), the next example, found in coverage of the Rio Olympics through Channel NewsAsia—Rio de Janeiro (in an article by Powell, 2017), features not only a marginalized stakeholder, but also a stakeholder who lives and works in the locale where the environmental problem exists—and must deal with the issue day to day, including after the Games when the athletes have left. Also of note in the following excerpt is that the voice of a person in this local circumstance is featured (i.e., the person is quoted in the article, instead of only being “talked about” by the journalist or another commentator):

Fisherman Luis Fernando has fished in the Baia de Guanabara his whole life, enjoying what was once a bountiful haul . . . . But this is changing as more and more untreated sewage and industrial waste flows into the bay . . . . “The Bay is very dirty [he says]. People throw all sorts of things in here. It’s full of mud and sewage, with no dredging. There needs to be a serious cleanup of the bay, then we wouldn’t struggle as much. Fishermen wouldn’t suffer as much,” he said. Luis’ future remains uncertain and he is forced to wake up earlier and travel further each day to catch the fish that used to be so plentiful . . . . The Olympics should have been a lifeline for people like Luis Fernando, but authorities have failed to deliver the clean up they promised. There is a lot more at stake for the men and women of the Baia de Guanabara than a gold medal. (Powell, 2017)

This excerpt might also lead to a questioning of the sometimes taken-for-granted assumption that hosting an Olympics is an excellent way to leverage a range of social and environmental benefits in the region that hosts them (Principle 4). While such
leveraging does appear to happen in some contexts, one might take from the above excerpt that this is not a universal benefit of the Games, and that “context matters” when it comes to claiming such benefits (Principle 1).

Furthermore, by discussing the history of the Bay—including mention of its previous status as an excellent location for fishing—this excerpt begins to offer important sociohistorical and socio-environmental context. Doing this would potentially enrich reader understandings of this sport-related environmental issue, invite curiosity as to why “authorities have failed to deliver the clean up they promised,” and inspire some to question the plausibility of pro-environment claims that appear in future Olympic bids in other potential host cities. By featuring the voice and particular experience of a local resident who deals with the environmental issue day-to-day, it is possible that the article will better engage readers—for example, by invoking emotional appeal—through this story about why pollution in the Bay matters (Principle 7).

“Ingesting Even Three Teaspoons of Water Meant a 99 Percent Chance of Infection by Virus”: Powerful Narrative/Imagery, Investigative, and Locally Focused

The next excerpt we feature, from an article in the New York Times by Boykoff (2016) entitled “What Makes Brazilians Sick,” is another example of journalism that is sensitive to context—although the context in this case pertains to the health-related implications of pollution:

An investigative report by [AP – Associated Press] and the virologist Fernando Spiliki of Brazil’s Feevale University found that Olympic water venues were badly contaminated. Ingesting even three teaspoons of water meant a 99 percent chance of infection by virus (though because of varying levels of immunity in the population, not everyone would necessarily fall ill) . . . . As the Games approach, the focus has been on how the polluted water could affect Olympic athletes. This overlooks the harm imposed every day on the city’s residents, known as Cariocas. For them, the water is a long-term health catastrophe. (Boykoff, 2016)

We would suggest that by using compelling imagery here—that is, the idea of “ingesting even three teaspoons of water” (something most readers could likely relate to)—this journalist has also adopted a technique that aligns well with Principle 7, as this excerpt (in a different way from above) includes a “compelling narrative and storytelling” that “may invoke emotional appeal.”

We would also suggest that by highlighting the common problem of focusing only on the impacts of pollution on Olympians—and thus, in turn, noting the problem of overlooking harms to local residents, and the unfairness of privileging the wellness of elite athletes over less privileged—the author of this article might be seen as taking a social and environmental justice stance (see Principle 6).

“I Am an Otter, Who’s Worried That My Food Supply Will Dwindle After the Ski Venue Construction”: Going Beyond Human-Centered Thinking

Finally, we move to an example of ESJ that is associated with Principle 3, “journalism that challenges norms of anthropocentrism, and focuses on problems of non-humans as well as humans.” Here is the featured excerpt, from an article in Hankyoreh by Yoon and Kang (2014) entitled “Mt. Gariwang Bulldozed for Olympic Skiing—Where Will the Wildlife Go?”:

We are introducing ourselves, those who are being forced out of Mt. Gariwang due to the construction of the ski venue. I am a badger, the one who left droppings with red seeds embedded in them at the bottom of the mountain. I am a leopard cat, who ran away from the loud noises of the bulldozer. I am a flying squirrel who used to dive gracefully between trees with my leather wings wide open, now lost as to where to go . . . . I am an otter, who’s worried that my food supply will dwindle after the ski venue construction takes away my clean water from the creek . . . . Congratulations, PyeongChang Olympics—we are disappearing. (Yoon & Kang, 2014)

This passage offers us an excellent example of what it means to go beyond human-centered thinking, a feature of ESJ. For many environmental thinkers, highlighting how humans and nonhumans are part of a shared ecosystem is an important step toward shifting our thinking about environmental issues more broadly, and perhaps leading toward pro-environment behavior shifts (Brown et al., 2019).

In addition, we would argue that the innovative strategy of writing the article as though it is from the point of view of nonhumans is again (but in a distinct way) the kind of engaging writing style that “may invoke emotional appeal” (Principle 7).

Limitations, Reflections, and Conclusions

Our argument for considering the potential value of the “ESJ” approach comes with a set of important caveats and acknowledged limitations. The first is an acknowledgement that journalists are part of a larger media system and, especially for journalists who work for media outlets especially concerned with (and accountable to) commercial interests, there are factors out of a journalist’s control that influence what stories are reported and how they are reported. For example, the commercial motives and political leaning of those who own the media outlets that journalists publish within are known to impact the type of coverage that is supported and featured. In this context, decisions by editors about what stories to assign journalists, and how to edit the stories journalists do produce, may be based on long-standing assumptions about what stories are thought to be newsworthy, as well as pressure from ownership (Hardin, 2005). Shoemaker and Reese (1996) devised the “hierarchy of influences” model to highlight precisely these kinds of influences on what becomes media content.

These limitations and caveats notwithstanding, journalists certainly still have agency in this system—which is to say journalists “can still choose to privilege certain kinds of content over others in their day to day practices, despite pressures and editorial decisions ‘from above’” (Wilson & van Luijk, 2019, p. 35). We would, therefore, suggest that guides like the ESJ principles proposed here can be helpful for those interested in producing justice-oriented articles, even within commercial systems—all the while acknowledging that journalists are not the only ones determining whether ESJ principles might be adhered to.

We acknowledge here too how the occupational precariousness of contemporary journalism is an important contextual consideration when thinking about possibilities for and barriers to ESJ. It is well known that full-time journalist positions within news outlets have declined markedly over the past 20 years, and especially over the past decade (Schleifstein, 2020). Schleifstein (2020) noted how this...
trend is reflected in the employment patterns of those who are declared members of the Society for Environmental Journalists, with the largest group of members identifying as "freelancers" according to recent statistics from the society. This employment trend does not necessarily mean that the amount of ESJ is reduced, although it has meant (at least in the United States) that environmental news stories are more often attained now through "established news services like AP, the New York Times or the Washington Post, or by contracting with freelancers" (Schleifstein, 2020, p. 163).

This trend has also meant that a wealth of excellent environmental writing now appears outside traditional mainstream venues, although it has meant (at least in the United States) that environmental news stories are more often attained now through "established news services like AP, the New York Times or the Washington Post, or by contracting with freelancers" (Schleifstein, 2020, p. 163).

This trend toward less traditional venues for journalism has led, however, to important questions about what audiences are being reached from these outlets and how much trust audiences place in news from nontraditional outlets—recognizing that these outlets exist in a media environment that includes a wide range of unsubstantiated messages and sources (see Sachsen & Valenti, 2020a).

Of key importance in this context too is that in vulnerable regions of the world especially, the financial insecurity experienced by freelance journalists—as well as potential physical risks associated with reporting on some issues and challenging the status quo—is thought to have negatively impacted the amount and type of coverage of climate change–related issues (Wadud, 2022). Specifically, Wadud found that "freelance journalists often do not report on issues that can put them at physical and financial risks" (Wadud, 2022)—a crucial point of consideration as we contemplate the potential for ESJ not only in a moment where employment for journalists has become increasingly precarious, but also with respect to the differential impacts of this precarity in different parts of the world.

The second acknowledgement is that the ESJ approach proposed here—as an approach based on a set of general principles—will be most useful for sport studies researchers and journalists who use it reflexively and flexibly. Questions about, for example, what “counts” as highly contextually sensitive sports journalism (i.e., "when is an article contextually sensitive enough to count as ESJ?") and environmental issues is needed")—or “what counts” as sports journalism that questions taken-for-granted assumptions and encourages a questioning of value norms (and what sport-related norms especially are being identified)—will undoubtedly arise again and again. Articles that include some elements of ESJ (e.g., that “offer some form of hope and identify alternatives”) but not others (e.g., the same article might not be “highly contextually sensitive”) are of course difficult to assess in some respects—and would, for analytic purposes at least, require a more nuanced qualitative approach. Due to these kinds of within-article contradictions, practical questions might also be raised about how to write more uniformly ESJ-oriented articles, and the tensions encountered by journalists who have difficulty doing so in a system that might discourage aspects of ESJ.3

Our intention here was to strike a balance between being "specific enough" so that the principles might act as a guide for analysis and for doing pro-environment journalism—while being “general enough” to encourage reflexive engagement with questions about how to apply each principle, so as not to reinforce an inflexible or decontextualized view of what counts as quality. For example, we might be more likely to see more realized versions of ESJ in long-form articles that appear in niche media (with a pro-environment mandate), compared with shorter articles in more traditional media where even small doses of ESJ might be seen as positive and significant, and thus worthy of note.

In this vein, we also take seriously a warning that emerged from research conducted by Boykoff and Boykoff (2004), who described how some journalists, in an attempt to adhere to journalistic norms and criteria concerning quality—but without adequate attention to the need for reflexive interpretations and applications of these criteria—inadvertently risk covering environment-related stories in questionable ways. Boykoff and Boykoff (2004) offered a specific compelling example of this kind of problem in their study of media coverage of climate change of U.S. media coverage of climate change from 1988 to 2002. The authors noted that journalistic norms concerning the provision of "balanced" coverage of environmental issues meant that some media reports attempted to "balance" views on whether climate change is "real"—despite near-consensus among credible scientists that climate change is not only real, but also an existential threat to life on our planet. A more thoughtful application of balance in this case, would, for example, focus on the range of potential impacts of climate change scenarios, with a "balanced" examination of views on best possible responses to the range of scenarios—without offering undue space to poorly supported arguments about whether climate change is real (even if these are associated with a "side" of the debate). While the issue of balance is no longer as prominent in recent coverage (though still present in some conservative-leaning outlets) (McAllister et al., 2021), we take this example seriously as we advocate for an ESJ approach—all the while being adamant about the need to remain reflexive, flexible, and rigorous when considering how ESJ might be applied. With this point in mind, we would also argue that targeted training for aspiring (sport) journalists concerning “best practice” coverage of sport-related environmental issues is worth developing to help avoid some of these issues (Weedon & Wilson, 2020).

Finally, we acknowledge that differently positioned audiences will take up media messages in sometimes very distinct ways (see Boykoff, 2019)—and that audience interpretations are known to be associated with preexisting views on the urgency of environmental concerns (along with other factors: Leiserowitz et al., 2021). Recognizing this means acknowledging too that there is no guarantee that ESJ will have pro-environment impacts, and certainly not for all readers (a point made for other kinds of sport-related environmental communication too—see Casper et al., 2017, 2020). We would, however, suggest that the best that can be done, at least as a start, is to introduce criteria, based on existing evidence concerning quality (environmental) journalism, with consideration of “likely” pro-environment impacts on a range of audiences (as we have attempted to do)—and from this foundation consider more niche attempts to connect with more difficult-to-engage audiences along the way.

None of these challenges are necessarily surprising. Debates about what counts as excellent and ethical journalism are long-standing and ongoing, and vibrant debate is part of the process of maintaining quality and improving standards (Ward, 2010). On this basis, our hope is that this article might inspire further critical reflection and dialogue about the process for not only identifying principles/criteria for what might be considered “excellent” journalism when it comes to covering sport-related environmental issues, but also for deciding how to apply these principles—with the broader aim of contributing to thinking about the role that sport media and sport...
media research might play in addressing one of the most pressing issues of the current moment and into the future.

Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge support offered through a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Insight Research Grant (sponsor identifier 435-2013-1234). The authors also express gratitude to the anonymous reviewers and editor for their extremely helpful suggestions throughout the review process.

Notes

1. Articles were identified that included the word “가라황산” (Mount Garawang).
2. The person writing this article, Jules Boykoff, is also a professor and leading researcher on sport mega-events—who commonly contributes journalistic pieces to major publications.
3. For sports journalists especially, the complexities of the job should not be underestimated here—with journalists now carrying out traditional responsibilities for dramatizing upcoming events and reporting outcomes along with an increasing mandate for responsibly covering sport-related social and environmental issues (and doing all of this across multiple platforms; Weedon & Wilson, 2020; Boyle, 2017; Hutchins & Rowe, 2012). Further challenges have been shown to exist for sports writers who must negotiate tensions in sports-newsrooms that are associated with a range of forms of discrimination (see Farrington et al., 2012; Hardin & Shain, 2006).

References


Dolf, M., & Teehan, P. (2015). Reducing the carbon footprint of spectator and team travel at the University of British Columbia’s varsity sports events. *Sport Management Review, 18*(2), 244–255. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2014.06.003


Gazette, 73(1), 39–61 https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716203261940


