

Original scientific paper

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.58984/smbic240201133p>

Received: 18.11.2024

Accepted: 11.12.2024

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THE IMPORTANCE OF SPORTS IN THE EDITORIAL POLICY OF RADIO BROADCASTING COMPANIES IN SERBIA¹

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Abstract: Radio has held various degrees of significance in the world of mass media throughout history, though today it is often overshadowed by newer media forms. Nevertheless, radio still maintains a significant audience that follows content through traditional radio sets and in other ways. On the other hand, sports represent one of the powerful global industries and an important segment of the daily life of a large number of people. Additionally, sports can be significant in discussions of unity and divisions within a society. Considering all this, the aim of this paper is to examine the editorial policy regarding sports in media enterprises that provide radio services through terrestrial transmission across the entire Republic of Serbia. Specifically, it explores how and in what ways sports, as an important segment of society, are presented in the programs of radio stations with national frequency, and what importance it receives as part of the media agenda. Here, a significant difference is already evident between the approach of the national public media service and the lack of such content in commercial broadcasters.

Keywords: sports, mass media, radio, editorial policy, media content

¹ This paper is part of the research project “Sports, Media, and Journalism – Perception of the Present and Future” by the Faculty of Sport, “Union – Nikola Tesla” University, Belgrade (project duration: 2024–2027).

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Introduction

In 2024, when Radio Belgrade marks a century of existence, among the significant segments of its history are the sports programs broadcasted on this medium, the oldest in the former Yugoslavia, with a tradition and archive representing cultural heritage of immense importance in this region. Sports content has been present practically since its inception, with the first radio broadcast of a football match, BSK vs. Jugoslavija, aired in 1929⁴. Two years later, Radio Belgrade introduced its first sports show, *Čas gimnastike na radiju* (RTS, 2022), followed by other iconic programs still aired today, such as *Sportski žurnal* (June 8, 1953) and *Vreme sporta i razonode* (March 10, 1960)⁵.

Over time, sports began occupying more space on radio stations, not only on Radio Belgrade but also across other channels with the expansion of this medium. This makes it interesting to analyze today's situation, examining how sports are represented in radio programs in Serbia. Specifically, this paper focuses on the editorial policy of stations with national frequencies, considering their wide reach and listenership.

Theoretical Framework

Throughout history, sports have garnered significant attention worldwide as a domain driven by the "achievement motive" where "results are exact, successes visible, and invested capital measurable" (Koković, 1996: 51). Thus, it represents "a societal segment where results determine rankings, but the effort invested is often undervalued compared to the outcome achieved" (Bajić, 2022: 115).

"Sporting events have long represented a pinnacle of entertainment and activities that are part of everyday life, whether as spectators or participants (...) making it one of the most profitable industries that brings great earnings and popularity to participants" (Пенеzić, 2020a: 381–382).

Given this, sports attract significant global attention. In some societies, an "excessive belief in sports and its functions" leads to its mythologization, viewing it as "a new kind

⁴ It happened on April 7, 1929, when BSK won 7:1. The first reporter was Rade Stoilović. (RTS, 2022). More at <https://www.rts.rs/lat/sport/fudbal/4769323/na-danasnji-dan-1929-radio-beograd-prvi-put-prenosio-fudbalski-mec.html>.

⁵ More at: <https://www.rts.rs/lat/radio/radio-beograd-1/5538033/vek-sporta-na-radio-beogradu.html> (RTS, 2024).

of religion for achieving leading ideals" (Koković, 2007: 321). Sports are often judged solely by achieved results, even though it encompasses much more. Among those who venture into sports and dedicate years to training, sacrificing significantly for progress, only a select few achieve Olympic heights, with others navigating paths often fraught with challenges and unpredictabilities (Бажих, 2021: 16).

This underscores that "sports today undoubtedly represent more than games and competition" and have become "a domain where not only sports skills decide outcomes" but where "sports and other societal aspects intertwine" (Пенезић, 2020b: 546). Major events like the Olympics serve as "platforms for strengthening soft power and disseminating messages in international relations" (Бажих, 2015).

One key reason for this is the vast media presence of sports, progressively expanding its influence. Today, it is not just the event itself but its media representation that matters, leading to the mediatization of sports⁶. The abundance of information also presents challenges, as "the development trajectory of post-industrial civilization and the information society conditions this issue" (Vitković, 2009: 88).

Radio mass media, or radio media enterprises (RME), represent "the first electronic and solely auditory mass communication medium" (Милетић, 2016: 217), defining their operation and place in media systems and society, including their survival under modern circumstances. RMEs "specialize in preparing, shaping, and electronically delivering content-programs to listening audiences" (Милетић, 2016: 219), traditionally via ultra-short waves, with an increasing influence of new technologies in recent years.

With media adapting to new technologies, radio has evolved significantly, especially in the digital age, as "digitization and the Internet have enabled traditional radio to gain new formats, listeners, enriched content, and global accessibility" (Raketić, 2022: 29). Listeners now have new possibilities and roles: "they take the content they want from the broadcaster at the time that suits them best; they follow it on the device of their own choice and in the place they want" (Ćitić, 2020: 1343).

While radio's influence has waned compared to its peak in the first half of the 20th century, it still produces content, including sports topics. Primary content reflects the editorial policy's emphasis on what is deemed most important, aligning with agenda-setting theory⁷.

⁶ As a concept, mediatization "describes the interactive connection between the media, culture, and society" (McQuail, 2010: 563), where the media create a specific worldview and influence changes in behavior patterns (Mladenović, 2017: 165).

⁷ This theory discusses how public attention is directed toward specific topics (McCombs & Shaw, 1993).

Current trends in the global media market undoubtedly influence radio programs (RP), dictating new models of their operation and editing, which can be seen in:

- Uniformly structured programming schedules of RMP (their content) due to the global trend of commercialization (a consequence is the failure to fulfill the basic informational function);
- The creation of an environment that does not favor those RMP that follow the motto "everything for someone", also highlighted by Miletić (Милетић, 2016), and which have a classic programming schedule and a collage character (like Radio Belgrade).

These are consequences of the fact that the phase of program formatting (content) has long been a key segment in the strategic planning of RMP operations, significantly determining the following phases. It is determined by market research results and aimed at the target audience. This is, however, also connected to another fact pointed out by most relevant studies, which show that only ten percent of people today get their information from the radio, while as much as three-quarters listen exclusively for music.

Therefore, the process of formatting is mostly carried out through the selection of musical content and the general commercialization of RMP content, which means their dominant framing into formats whose primary goal is to entertain the audience. As a result, their informational function is relegated to the background when defining editorial policy and creating programming schedules. This has a significant impact on the adequate informing of the audience, and consequently, on the position of sports content in such a working model.

The ultimate result is an abundance of similar radio content, which can also be observed within the domestic media system, where stations are running the same race, competing for a shrinking audience and advertisers. That is why the system is dominated by a large number of commercialized clones, whose schedules are predominantly focused on current and popular music hits, with brief information blocks interrupting them. The victim of such an editorial orientation is the news program, investigative journalism, and so-called live programs, as most of them become almost "one-man shows", where frequently the lone radio host often plays the roles of music editor and technical staff simultaneously, performing all necessary tasks. This inevitably sacrifices the originality of content and the information provided to their audience.

Looking at the media scene in Serbia, the division between the national public service radio stations and commercial broadcasters is evident. Regarding the Public Media

Institution "Radio Television of Serbia", there are four programs at the national level: Radio Belgrade 1, Radio Belgrade 2, Radio Belgrade 3, and Radio 202⁸.

As stated in the Law on Public Media Services, it is "an independent and autonomous legal entity that, by performing its primary activity, enables the achievement of the public interest in the field of public information and provides general and comprehensive media services that include informational, educational, cultural, and entertainment content intended for all parts of society". It is also emphasized that "in performing its primary activity, the public media service has institutional autonomy and editorial independence", and that "in its operations, the public media service achieves the public interest, takes into account the public's demands, and is accountable to the public" (Закон о јавним медијским сервисима, 1–3).

On the other hand, the commercial broadcasters with national frequencies are Radio Play (Play radio d.o.o)⁹, Radio S (Radiodifuzno privredno društvo Radio S d.o.o), Radio S2 (Privredno društvo za proizvodnju i emitovanje RTV programa Index d.o.o), Hit Music FM (Radio hit FM d.o.o)¹⁰, and Radio Lola (Radio Karolina d.o.o)¹¹.

The current license to broadcast content at the national level in the Republic of Serbia was granted to these four programs by the decision of the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM) in 2022 (REM, 2022). The centralization of the domestic media market is evident from the fact that all radio stations with national frequencies are headquartered in Belgrade.

⁸ As stated in the Law on Public Media Services, it is "an independent and autonomous legal entity that, by performing its basic activity, enables the realization of public interest in the field of public information and provides general and comprehensive media services, which include informative, educational, cultural, and entertainment content intended for all segments of society." It also emphasizes that "in performing its core activities, the public media service has institutional autonomy and editorial independence", and that "in its operations, the public media service realizes the public interest, takes into account the demands of the public, and is accountable to the public" (Law on Public Media Services, 1–3).

⁹ In parentheses are the legal entities that have received frequencies, while there have been some changes in the ownership of radio stations.

¹⁰ The current broadcasting license for these four programs was granted by the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) in 2022 (REM, 2022).

¹¹ The national frequency granted to Radio Cherry (Kolorton print d.o.o) in 2021 was later transferred to Radio Karolina, which was renamed Radio Lola, now active in the territory of the Republic of Serbia. More about this at <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/drzava-i-mediji/rem-ozvanicio-lagano-i-fino-karolina-postala-nacionalni-radio> (Kolundžija, 2022).

Research Results

A cursory glance at the programming schedules of radio stations with national frequencies indicates that, practically, the public service is the only one that consistently devotes attention to sports events and sports in general – predominantly Radio Belgrade 1. Specifically, this channel's programming includes the previously mentioned shows with decades-long traditions – Sportski žurnal, which airs every day except Saturday after the central daily news (Novosti dana), and Vreme sporta i razonode, a multihour program that airs on Saturdays. Additionally, on Radio Belgrade 1, Sportski spomenar is broadcast on Sundays, and there are special segments outside of these formats – live broadcasts (Sportsko veče) on days when matches are played that stand out or are considered particularly important according to the editorial policy of the media outlet.

In addition to all of the above, sports represent a segment of the Novosti dana program, as well as other news programs, depending on the activities of the day and their significance. Considering the segmented programming schedules of Radio Belgrade 2 (from morning to evening) and Radio Belgrade 3 (in the evening hours), sports are not a focus, except for when they appear in the informational content, such as news on Radio Belgrade 2, in cases of significant events.

The situation is completely different when it comes to the considerably simpler programming setup of commercial radio stations with national frequencies¹². According to the Law on Public Media Services, in addition to its primary activities, the public media service "may also engage in commercial activities, provided that it does not jeopardize its primary activities" (Закон о јавним медијским сервисима, р. 2). Specifically, the programming schedules of these commercial broadcasters are formatted in a way that everything is subordinated to musical content and entertainment formats with recognizable radio voices or hosts of these entertainment formats, often divided into morning, afternoon, and evening stars. Sports may be part of the conversation or occasionally covered informally, but it does not have a permanent place in the program schedule.

Thus, the focus of this paper is on Radio Belgrade 1, as the last stronghold of sports on radio stations with national frequencies in Serbia. The focus is on its editorial policy concerning sports, with a closer examination of its status within the informational content that is not specialized in sports. Specifically, the question is how much sports content is included in the central news program on a daily basis, which still represents the main channel for informing the largest number of citizens who listen to Radio Belgrade

¹² According to the Law on Public Media Services, in addition to its core activities, the public media service "may also engage in commercial activities, provided that it does not undermine the performance of its core activities" (Law on Public Media Services, p. 2).

1. This concerns *Novosti dana*, which airs every day at 3 PM. It is clear that *Sportski žurnal*, which follows immediately afterward, covers a variety of other content, but it is interesting to see how much sports content is included in the moments when a diverse audience is listening to the overview of the most important events of the day.

For the sample, editions of *Novosti dana*¹³ were taken from three different periods: from September 14 to 17, October 14 to 17, and November 14 to 17, 2024. By covering three different months, a more comprehensive picture is obtained than from a single sample, as there could be more or fewer significant national-level sports events during those specific days. Additionally, during this period, there were several different news editors.

Table 1. Sports in "*Novosti dana*" on Radio Belgrade 1

Date (Total of 12 days)	Total Seconds	Sports in Headlines	Total Seconds in Sports Segments	Total News in Sports Segments
14.09.2024.	1754	1	175	9
15.09.2024.	1700	1	137	3
16.09.2024.	1850	0	165	4
17.09.2024.	1860	1	118	1
14.10.2024.	1692	1	118	4
15.10.2024.	1804	1	164	2
16.10.2024.	1942	1	24	2
17.10.2024.	1784	2	98	2
14.11.2024.	2080	1	111	2
15.11.2024.	1818	1	152	2
16.11.2024.	1989	0	218	4
17.11.2024.	1950	1	138	4
Total:	22.223	11	1618	39

Source: Author's processing

¹³ "*Novosti dana*," as the central news program of Radio Belgrade's First Program, has been broadcast since the autumn of 1958. As emphasized on the RTS website, "since then, it has represented a relevant and comprehensive overview of the most important information and events from the country and the world." More at: [<https://www.rts.rs/radio/radio-beograd-1/emisija/2681/novosti-dana.html?s=2681>] (<https://www.rts.rs/radio/radio-beograd-1/emisija/2681/novosti-dana.html?s=2681>).

Looking at Table 1, it can be observed that sports play a clearly defined role in every edition of Novosti dana, thus distinguishing itself as one of the important segments of society. On average, the sports segment, located at the end of this news program, occupied around 7.3% of the total time (including both the introductory and closing parts of the news program, along with the opening and closing segments), or two minutes and 15 seconds. Also, during the observed period, an average of slightly more than three news reports/segments were aired per broadcast.

In addition to the separate segment, sports are often included in the headlines¹⁴ are read at the beginning and/or end of the news program and represent breaking news, key information highlighted within the specific broadcast of Novosti dana, or in the most important news of the day. During the observed period, this occurred on 10 out of 12 days, and on one occasion, two flash news reports were aired.

Table 2. *Structure of sports content in "Novosti dana" on Radio Belgrade 1*

		With Domestic Participants	Without Domestic Participants
Domestic (and Regional) Sports Competitions	Basketball	2	
	Football	4	
International Sports Competitions (Beyond Regional)	Athletics	1	
	Basketball	6	
	Boxing		1
	Chess	1	
	Football	8	2
	Motorsport	1	
	Tennis	6	1
	Volleyball	1	
	Waterpolo	3	
Other		2	
Total:		35	4

Source: Author's processing

¹⁴ Headlines (hedovi) are read at the beginning and/or end of a news program and represent flash news, selected information that is given special significance within a specific program (Јевтовић, Петровић & Арацки, 2014; Миленковић, 2022).

A more detailed look at the previously mentioned sports content clearly shows that the editorial policy of the analyzed news program emphasizes international sports competitions (those larger than regional events) when domestic actors—such as local athletes, clubs, and national teams—are involved. In this way, the journalistic principle of proximity is respected, and such content constitutes nearly 70% of the total. The focus is primarily on announcements and outcomes of sporting events. If we include information from the regional basketball competition, which the top local clubs participate in during most of the season (with national championships only involving them in the final stages), the percentage rises even higher (almost 75%). On the other hand, only one out of every ten news reports/segments did not contain domestic actors, regardless of the competition.

Looking at the sports categories, the coverage follows the popularity of sports in the region, with the variable naturally depending on the relevance of the competition during the observed period. Football news dominates, making up 36%, followed by basketball (over 20%) and tennis (18%). Additionally, the sports segment of *Novosti dana* also serves to announce other sports content on the public service's radio and television programs, such as sports shows and live broadcasts of sporting events.

Conclusion

Radio, or radio media companies (RMP), as named previously in this article, today, like other so-called traditional media, are facing the challenge of adapting to the new media ecosystem (and beyond), and the changed working and business conditions, but also to the characteristics of the specific local media system.

The aspect of editorial management, framed by the formatting phase, emerges as crucial for overcoming these challenges and achieving successful adaptation (the importance of adequate content formatting in RP). As we have seen, formatting is the central point in their editorial-management orientation and later market results.

Considering the characteristics of the global media market and the current trends within it, however, formatting is also the driving force behind the current commercialization of radio media complexes, i.e., the standardization of content within this part of the media landscape and the abandonment of originality and responsibility in public reporting.

On the other hand, we must not forget that sport is certainly one of the globally more interesting areas for the broad public, and its treatment in the process of creating editorial-management concepts of RP (formatting and programming schemes) is particularly important. Analyzing the relationship between radio and sport, as well as the

unique magnetism that can be observed in this relationship, one must be aware that "entertainment (and thus sport) mostly takes place when our actions are not analyzed" (Пенеџић, 2020c: 369), which is an observation inherent to the nature of the radio medium but also to the popularity of sporting events and the content about them .

Considering its social importance and popularity, its decreasing presence in domestic programming schemes represents, therefore, a paradox. Namely, its position should imply a different attitude, an understanding that it is an important resource for popularity and better positioning in the market, which is clearly often overlooked by those managing RP.

The characteristics of radio make it particularly attractive for sport, given, for example, the important place of radio broadcasts of sports events in programming schemes (a phenomenon still valuable today) and the fact that a radio reporter can turn even a less important sporting event into a particularly interesting one for the audience. Radio was the pioneer of live interviews among mass media, conducted after a sporting event. This position of RP is now further emphasized, considering innovations in the market, such as the phenomenon of the popularity and abundance of sports podcasts (meta-media structures of the new age arising from the logic of former RP), which represent significant niches for sports audiences and organizations.

However, in Serbia, as we can see, there is less and less room for sport in the programs of the most influential RP. The exception is content within the public service's radio programs, while the rest of the domestic radio complex has evidently deemed this area less important, dedicating only enough space (time) to briefly summarize the most important current information throughout the day. This also means a direct neglect of fulfilling the basic informative function of RP, which is clearly reflected in the case of sport for most of them, but also a form of self-destruction concerning their own position in the market and long-term survival on it, if we are aware of the presence of this area in the lives of the average listener, which is an absurdity in itself.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, S.P., B.P.; **Resources**, S.P., B.P. ; **Methodology**, S.P., B.P.; **Investigation**, S.P., B.P. **Data curation**, S.P., B.P. **Formal Analysis**, S.P., B.P.. **Writing – original draft**, S.P.; **Writing – review & editing**, S.P.

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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