



## Article

# Tension between Journalistic and Entertainment Values in Live Soccer TV Commentary: The Commentator's Perspective

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**Abstract:** This article examines the tension between journalistic and entertainment values in live soccer TV commentary from the perspective of German commentators. We situate journalistic and entertainment values within the commentators' wider understanding of their roles as sports journalists and commentators, looking at a specific type of sports journalist who has different responsibilities from the general sports reporter. We asked how soccer commentators assess the role of journalistic and entertainment values in their work, and what constraints they face, such as how the perceived expectations of their employer affect this assessment. We interviewed 28 TV commentators, one radio commentator, and one expert working for relevant German TV channels and streaming platforms, such as ZDF, Sky, and DAZN. While all interviewees see themselves as companions telling the story of the match, most commentators in the sample value journalistic values over entertainment values, a surprising finding in the hyper-commercialized world of sports television. Well-founded journalistic expertise and soccer knowledge are considered most important. However, this assessment depends on factors such as the broadcaster's guidelines and the nature of the match. In summary, the role of the commentator is either an 'objective mediator' or an 'emotional entertainer', but this is a balancing act.



**Citation:** Kunert, Jessica, and Peer Kuni. 2023. Tension between Journalistic and Entertainment Values in Live Soccer TV Commentary: The Commentator's Perspective. *Journalism and Media* 4: 631–647. <https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia4020040>

Academic Editors: José Luis Rojas Torrijos and Daniel Nölleke

Received: 6 March 2023

Revised: 4 May 2023

Accepted: 4 May 2023

Published: 17 May 2023



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**Keywords:** entertainment; journalistic roles; live commentary; sports journalism

## 1. Introduction

This article studies how German live soccer TV commentators perceive the tension between journalistic and entertainment values in their work. We thereby looked at a special type of sports journalist who has a major influence on how the audience perceives a match as it unfolds (Barnfield 2013; Danneboom 1988; Schaffrath 2003). As commentators accompany a soccer match, they provide information about the match and thus fulfill an orientation function, but they also express their own opinion and entertain the audience (Bölz 2018, pp. 107–8), essentially mixing the journalistic forms of factual reporting and subjective commentary (Wiske 2017, p. 26). In this way, they influence the memory and evaluations of the audience (Schaffrath 2003; Vögele and Götz 2016, pp. 35–36). While previous research on German live soccer commentary has focused on the characteristics of a 'good' commentary (e.g., Schaffrath 2018, 2019; Wiske 2017), this study focuses on how journalistic and entertainment values are incorporated into commentary and how the tension between them is evaluated by commentators. On the one hand, journalistic values are, for example, objectivity, balance, precise expression, and conciseness (e.g., English 2017; Wiske 2017, p. 27). Furthermore, we operationalized Mast's (2004, p. 476) four basic journalistic skills as journalistic values (expertise, technical competence, mediation competence, and organizational competence; more on these values below). Entertainment values, on the other hand, include emotionality, storytelling, providing inside information, and partiality (e.g., Kroppach 1978, p. 137; Schaffrath 2007; Scheu 2007). Subjectivity

and opinion cannot be classified as either/or because it depends on how the subjectivity or opinion is expressed. Both can be conveyed with journalistic value in mind, i.e., in an analytical matter, or with the goal of entertainment, for example with great emotion (Lang 2009). Therefore, these values appear in both categories in the course of the analysis. In addition, we investigated which constraining factors affect the commentators' evaluation of these values for their commentary, such as the context of their broadcaster. As live soccer commentary is a hybrid form of journalism, it usually contains both journalistic and entertainment values, but we are interested in the evaluation of the respective importance of these values for the live commentary.

We chose Germany as the context for our case study. Here, the competition in live soccer broadcasting has increased sharply since 2017: soccer broadcasting rights for all German leagues and the national team matches are now distributed between multiple TV broadcasters and streaming services, down to splitting individual match days between platforms (Heinrich 2017; Sport1 2019). Furthermore, with the exception of the national matches and a few special leagues matches, soccer matches can only be watched for a subscription fee. Thus, the increasing fragmentation of channels means that there is a competition for audience attention (and wallets). As the commentators play a major role in shaping the soccer viewing experience, it is appropriate to study how they commentate on the matches and the devices they use.

We shed new light on the role of the commentator, a special type of sports reporter, and show that journalistic values are important to commentators' work. However, there is no uniformity in the sample, and the self-conceptions follow individual considerations that depend, for example, on their own views and the guidelines of their broadcaster.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Tensions in Sports Journalism

Sport has certain characteristics that lend themselves to making a product that warrants journalistic and entertainment treatment. As such, sport is characterized by "conflict, excitement, variety, physicality/personalization, strategic and tactical actions by soloists and teams, simple rules, open and measurable outcome, seriality of competitions" (Stiehler 2003, p. 164, translated by the authors; Knobloch-Westerwick et al. 2009)—a mix that audiences were found to enjoy in their spare time and get emotional rewards from (Raney 2006).

While sports journalism gathers great "economic capital" (English 2016) and has done so since the beginning of the mass media (Whannel 2009), insofar that it drives audience metrics and advertisement sales and is often prominently placed in print products and on media outlets' websites, sports journalists generally do not hold much prestige in the newsroom (Boyle 2006, 2017; English 2016; McEnnis 2020; Rowe 2007). The argument, especially made by journalists from other beats, is that sports is said to be trivial 'soft' journalism (Boyle 2017), with its journalists acting as uncritical 'fans' (Boyle 2006, 2017). Sports journalism has even been called "the world's best advertising agency" (Schultz Jørgensen 2005)—namely due to descriptive reporting of sports events, working with only few sources, and being more concerned with subjectivity than objectivity (Boyle 2006; McEnnis 2020; Schultz Jørgensen 2005).

This positioning of sports has direct effects on sports journalism and impacts the journalists' self-perceptions. Sports journalists reject that their beat is often derogatorily called "the toy department of the media" (Garrison 1989; Rowe 2007) and persist in claiming that they also hold journalistic capital in terms of holding power to account and investigative stories and are thus not simply 'fans' with access to sports venues and stars (English 2016, 2017, p. 537; Perreault and Bell 2022; Rowe 2007).

We can thus note a tension between journalistic and entertainment values in sports journalism. While the sports journalists' main desire has been found to inform their audience in a neutral and precise way, like their counterparts from other beats, providing entertainment and relaxation to the audience is also a high priority (for an overview over

studies of German sports journalists, see [Schaffrath 2020](#), p. 53). Studies have found that, more often than not, ‘light’ reporting is the main output of sports journalism which caters towards the taste of the audience ([Rowe 2007](#)) and that storytelling features that takes audiences “behind the scenes” ([Perreault and Bell 2022](#), p. 407). This does not have to be a negative point per se—live blogs, for example, are one of the most-read contents ([McEnnis 2020](#), p. 1426)—but ‘hard’ journalism, such as investigative stories, do take the backseat. Moreover, sports journalists were also found to consciously emphasize entertaining and “enriching” (i.e., inside information) elements in their work ([Perreault and Bell 2022](#), pp. 407–8). In summary, there is a tension between economic realities (i.e., drawing large audiences in with entertaining stories) and journalistic pursuits, mostly driven by further commercialization ([McEnnis 2020](#)).

Elements that drive this tension are developments such as the competition for sports rights, the limitation of the media to a few telegenic sports, and the tabloidization and the dominance of live reporting ([Haynes 2019](#)). Moreover, new players enter the (digital) stage, and thus, for example, new streaming services are founded, which offer broadcasts from previously underrepresented global sports and leagues to “tiny audiences ... [that] generate much subscription revenue” ([Whannel 2009](#), p. 210). Moreover, “insurgents”, such as bloggers and team media ([Perreault and Bell 2022](#)), are coming to the fore, all of which requires journalism to adapt ([Perreault and Bell 2022](#), p. 409). As the competition increases, this inevitably leads to an increasing entertainment orientation on the part of program creators, while information is being replaced by dramaturgically staged elements ([Dohle and Vowe 2006](#)). Thus, media sports like soccer, i.e., primarily top-level sports, are presented in an event-centered and often dramatized way—preferring events, topics, and people that offer an entertainment factor ([Bertling 2009](#), p. 13).

## 2.2. The Live Report

The dramatization of an event is particularly true for live sports events, which are said to be largely responsible for the appeal of television ([Wiske 2017](#), p. 95) (even for selling television sets, see [Whannel 2009](#), p. 209) and are lauded as the “last bastion of the experience of simultaneous communal viewing” ([Whannel 2009](#), p. 216) in an era of fragmented (media) experiences.

The live report provides authenticity for those at home: with the generation of tension, the feeling of being there in person, and technological aspects such as replay and slow motion which may make the media-mediated experience even “superior to the experience of live spectatorship” ([Whannel 2009](#), p. 209). As [Wiske \(2017, p. 101, translated by the authors\)](#) says, “with an illustrative and image-rich broadcast, television uses the effect that the viewer can identify with the event and the athletes and put himself in their shoes”. That the entertainment aspect plays an important role here is shown by the structure of a sports program alone. Live coverage of the actual soccer game, for example, accounts for only 45 percent of the total broadcast. The rest is made up of pre- and post-game coverage, for instance interviews, analyses, super slow motion, home stories of individual players, competitions, and sponsoring, essentially blurring the boundaries between journalism and entertainment ([Wiske 2017](#), p. 48). However, unlike fictional entertainment, sport delivers a factual event, even though it is treated with sophisticated storytelling modes and dealt with as a spectacle with dramatic impact ([Barnfield 2013; Whannel 2009](#)). This approach provides entertainment in addition to journalistic information and opinion formation, allowing sports to address the audience on the level of affective and informative needs ([Schauerte and Schwier 2002](#), p. 44). However, [Grimmer and Horky \(2011, p. 4\)](#) warn against entertainment values becoming too prominent. They note that more and more airtime around the actual sporting event is being filled with stories, leading to a lack of what they believe sports journalists should also be doing, which is to control and critique what they are covering. In addition, they criticize exaggerated forms of presentation, a reduced variety in the preparation of topics, and programming that is overall determined by emotional factors.

### 2.3. The Role of the Live Commentator

The live commentator is a special type of sports journalist with a different set of tasks compared to their colleagues at the news desk. In the second half of the 20th century, sports commentators were even found to set themselves apart from sports journalism, highlighting their pledge to be neutral and thus traditional journalistic values, even calling themselves ‘broadcaster’ instead of ‘journalist’ (Boyle 2006, p. 61). This stark notion is watered down or even gone with the increasingly commercialized sports environment since the 1990s, with entertainment and partiality coming to the fore (Boyle 2006, p. 63). In fact, a live commentator, especially on TV, may become a household name and thus a ‘sports star’ in their own right (McEnnis 2018). Live TV commentators might thus achieve high status with the audience, which may depend on the events they commentate on (e.g., national matches with high viewer interest) and the reach of the broadcaster they work for (see English 2016, p. 1012).

The commentator has a huge impact on how viewers perceive a soccer match. Thus, a reality of the sporting event is constructed that is dependent on the commentary (Bryant et al. 1977; Schaffrath 2003), as the commentator sets the frame of the match (Barnfield 2013, p. 331). However, the commentator is not solely responsible for the viewers’ perception of the match. One intervening factor is the nature of the match, i.e., whether it is a match by the national team or by an unknown sports club. The problem here is that, even depending on the match, it is difficult to anticipate and satisfy the tastes of the viewers in front of the screens. Therefore, the commentators have to decide what style and what aims they want to achieve.

Soccer commentary is a hybrid of two forms of journalistic presentation. On the one hand, it is factual; on the other hand, it reflects a subjective view with an opinion. According to Mast (2004, p. 476), four basic journalistic skills are indispensable for commentary: expertise (e.g., on the topic and orienting knowledge), technical competence (e.g., basic journalistic skills such as research and writing), mediation competence (e.g., presentation format for the appropriate audience), and organizational competence (e.g., insight into production processes). As Barnfield (2013, p. 331) says, “commentary of a soccer match that is broadcast live on television is a complicated process” due to the multimodality of the medium: The focus is on the verbal accompaniment of the soccer match for the audience and in this context, the commentator should meaningfully complement the TV image with their descriptions. This includes supporting the picture’s message with background information, explanations, their own opinion, the reproduction of the atmosphere as well as personal information about the players and well-dosed statistics, all within a carefully weaved triad of “chronicle [detailing the events], mimesis [detailing the events vividly and with presence] and plot [the overall narrative]” (Barnfield 2013, p. 331)—and thus both journalistic and entertainment elements. The commentator should be able to explain, convey, and judge quickly as well as be original (Zimmer 2016). Through their language, the commentator can excite and entertain the audience as well as enhance the overall product. This includes, but is not limited to, forms of intensification, emotional expression, and linguistic hysterization (Kroppach 1978, p. 137). In fact, entertaining elements such as side stories or dramatic elements, or ‘color commentary’, has been found to increase the audience’s intention to watch other events “on the same channel or with the same commentators” (Lee et al. 2016; Bryant et al. 1977). As Lee and Bulitko (2010) noted, while color commentary may be added by one single commentator, along with play-by-play information, it is most often provided by experts, such as former professional players, who may add their past experiences or any kind of trivia that fits the situation at hand (Kuiper and Lewis 2013, p. 39). In slow phases of a match, the commentator and the expert might even “sound as though they are having a conversation in a private club” (Kuiper and Lewis 2013, p. 35). While this is a US- or UK-centric view, as two commentators are not the norm in Europe, this model of having an expert as a sidekick is being experimented with by German broadcasters such as DAZN. All in all, color commentary adds a “subjective and broad” view (Lee and Bulitko 2010, p. 253) to the experience of the audience through

storytelling and giving their own opinion (Lewandowski 2012, p. 68). Thus, entertainment elements have their firm place in the quality criteria catalogue.

The difficulty for the commentator is to bring the events directly to the point in their own words: “In sports journalistic reporting, events are broken down into actions and conveyed as experiences. The aim is to be able to translate the immediacy of sport into immediate language” (Bölz 2018, p. 175, translated by the authors). In doing so, the commentator must be able to absorb information quickly, i.e., be quick to act, and attempt to transfer his or her sensory impressions into words. Accordingly, the commentator’s work is not only precise, but also fast. Due to this high load, the commentator should have a high ability to concentrate. Under this enormous pressure, they must show maximum performance. According to Wiske (2017, p. 127), this means that they must be linguistically original, quick-witted, spontaneous, and able to convey a portion of humor and entertainment in addition to their knowledge. Derived from this, it can be said that the ultimate goal of the commentator is to report on the match in such a way that the audience participates sensually and directly in what is happening (Mast 2004, p. 195).

Even when the match is interrupted, the commentator is called upon. Here the commentator has to deliver narrative text passages and, if necessary, fill the breaks with background information. To do this, the commentator should be prepared for all eventualities and know everything about the match, including all the relevant players. In addition, he or she must know the entire set of rules, i.e., have a lot of basic knowledge, and recognize events that the audience does not anticipate (Wiske 2017, p. 47). In addition, the commentator must be able to convey what they want to say in a structured way that is comprehensible to the viewers.

#### 2.4. The ‘Good’ Commentary

Whether or not the audience enjoys listening to a soccer commentator is very subjective and is thus subject to tension. However, there are some criteria in the literature that make a ‘good’ live soccer commentator. These include rhetorical competence, i.e., being able to express oneself with a good choice of words on the subject, and the euphony of the commentator’s voice—which is subjective to the taste of the viewers—all without overloading the audience (Schaffrath 2007, 2018). According to Wiske (2017, p. 27), further quality characteristics for a soccer commentator are neutrality, distance, and credibility, in addition to precise expression, concise analyses, originality, and spontaneity, as well as a low number of errors (Lang 2009, pp. 71–73). According to this, the commentator should report on the soccer match in a journalistic and unbiased manner and come across as credible and serious due to their broad soccer knowledge. Although they must be neutral, i.e., not sympathetic to a team and thus no “cheerleader” (English 2017), he or she should provide subjective evaluations and assessments of the match that put it in the viewer’s perspective (Lang 2009).

The aforementioned quality criteria contradict the finding that it does not matter if the live commentator exaggerates or steps out of line, as in contrast to journalists from other beats, they may “violat[e] the norms of neutrality, balance, etc., in favor of audience loyalty and appeal” (Stiehler 2003, p. 165, translated by the authors). Accordingly, the commentator must cultivate a style to engage the viewers in front of the screens, even polarize, so that the viewer hears a clear opinion from the commentator (Schaffrath 2018, p. 55). In fact, this approach may even increase their level of recognition, especially in the mass medium of television, resulting in positive effects for them as sports journalists (Digel and Burk 2001, p. 27).

Audiences mostly appreciate a mix of journalistic quality combined with entertaining emotionality, especially in terms of receiving background information and match analysis alongside enthusiasm, emotion, and, depending on the type of match or event, partiality towards the national team (Klimmt et al. 2006). The latter, for instance, allows for striking up a relationship between commentator and audience, leading to parasocial interactions (Bölz 2018, p. 229).



All in all, the audience's expectations of the commentator are high, as they should fulfill many criteria from the audience's point of view. As Flügel (2009, p. 212, translated by the authors) says, "The commentator's biggest problem is usually that too much is expected of him from the outset. He should know as much as possible, see everything, and assess everything correctly—in a matter of seconds". Meeting all these requirements to the letter is utopian because "the perfect commentator does not exist" (Flügel 2009, p. 212).

In light of the literature above, our research questions are as follows:

- **RQ1:** How do live soccer TV commentators perceive the tension between journalistic and entertainment values in their work?
- **RQ2:** Which constraining factors affect this assessment?

### 3. Method

We used semi-structured interviews, asking interviewees about the importance of journalistic and entertainment values in their work and the constraints they may face. We analyzed the interviews using qualitative content analysis (Schreier 2012).

#### 3.1. Sample

We interviewed 30 live commentators (including one woman). There is a severe gender imbalance in German sports journalism, with the proportion of women in sports newsrooms being around 10 percent (Schaffrath 2020, p. 49). The imbalance is even more pronounced in live soccer TV commentary, which is why only one woman could be included—there was only one woman active in professional soccer in 2019 (Schwaiger 2022). Of the interviewed commentators, 28 were soccer TV commentators, one was a soccer radio commentator, whose views are clearly signposted in the results section, and one was a soccer TV expert. In addition, a pretest was conducted with two soccer journalists. Soccer commentators were chosen because soccer is the most popular sport in Germany and the broadcasts regularly achieve the highest TV ratings of all available content (Gerhard and Zubayr 2014).

All commentators work for relevant German TV channels and streaming platforms broadcasting soccer matches from the most popular leagues and competitions, namely ZDF (3), NDR (1), WDR (1) (all public service broadcasters), RTL (1), Eurosport (2), Sport1 (2), Sky (8) (all private broadcasters), Magenta Sport (2), sportdigital (5), DAZN (8) (all streaming platforms), and for radio ARD (1) and BR Fußball (1) (both public service broadcasters). As some commentators work for more than one channel, the sample size does not add up to 30.

In the results section, the interviewees are pseudonymized with numbers from 1 to 30 and their broadcaster.

#### 3.2. Procedures and Interview Questions

The interviews were divided into four thematic blocks. Starting with the personal career path of the interviewee, the aim was to find out what experience the interviewee had as a soccer commentator and for which broadcasters they worked during the 2018/19 soccer season (1 July 2018 to 30 June 2019). The second block of questions deals with the commentator's own understanding of their role on their own function and tasks, as well as the quality criteria for a soccer commentator. It also deals with the personal commentary style. The third block focuses specifically on journalistic and entertainment values, such as the commentators' perception of what the audience expects regarding entertainment and the extent to which they intentionally include entertaining factors in their commentary. The fourth block asks about influences that arise from the commentator's working context.

All interviewees were approached or contacted either through personal contacts, email, Facebook, through other interviewees, or by contacting relevant sports broadcasters. Overall, the interviews were conducted by telephone between 22 May 2019 and 27 June 2019, with the last interview conducted on 6 August 2019. Telephone interviewing was evaluated as being as data-rich as in-person interviewing, especially for semi-structured interviews

with otherwise hard-to-reach participants, such as the geographically dispersed and very busy commentators in this study (Cachia and Millward 2011). In addition, interviewee 2 answered the questionnaire by e-mail due to restructuring work at their broadcaster; they answered the questions in a short yet precise manner, which points to an effective e-mail interview (Meho 2006). The interviews lasted between 15 and 45 min, with an average of 30 min. All interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed.

### 3.3. Coding

The coding initially proceeded according to the interview guideline. During the coding and the analysis, the following overarching themes emerged: for RQ1 ‘main goals of commentating’ (overarching category; coded inductively), ‘professional values’ (e.g., with the sub-codes ‘journalistic values’ (with sub-sub codes, e.g., neutrality, analysis, balance) and ‘entertainment values’ (with sub-sub codes, e.g., storytelling, stylistic elements, use of expert)) and for RQ2 ‘professional constraints and influences’ (e.g., nature of the match, broadcaster guidelines, audience expectations; mostly coded inductively).

### 3.4. Limitations

The interviews covered only one point in time, and perceptions may change with broadcaster guidelines. In addition, we studied only one country, which, as we will see below, has its own overarching commentary conventions, so we cannot generalize our findings beyond the German sample or beyond the sport of soccer. Other sports, which are less medialized and thus commented on in a different context, may show different approaches.

## 4. Results

The main goal of the interviewed commentators is to provide orientation. As interviewee 11 (Sky) says, they see their job as guiding the viewer through the match: “As a commentator, I’m actually the one who takes the viewer by the hand. I don’t just provide them with information and know-how, but I’m also ultimately responsible for making sure they understand the match without overloading them with useless information”. Interviewee 2 (WDR) describes the job “as a mediator between the stadium and the audience at home. I classify things that can be seen. Things that can’t be seen [i.e., emotionality in the stadium, events away from the camera images], I verbalize”. In this way, the audience gets an overall picture of what is happening on and off the pitch without being there. Interviewee 18 (sportdigital) says they set the scene: “I see myself [...] quite clearly as the one who leads through the evening in the sense of: ‘Look, that’s the concert, that’s where the oboe sits, ...’. So you always start off small and step by step, like a museum director explaining the museum”. For commentators, then, it is important to accurately describe and analyze the situation, as well as to interpret and communicate their own thoughts about it. As interviewee 24 (DAZN) sums it up: “I want to find a phrasing that goes beyond that [description]. So I have to take the picture and my way of commentating to another level. I’m trying to reach a level that goes beyond what you see”.

For interview 5 (DAZN), the commentator has another important role to play. They try to be a support for the audience who might not immediately recognize which player is on the ball, and someone who explains things to the audience, such as tactics and background information. However, this service to the viewer is not necessarily value-free and objective, as interviewee 19 (ZDF) believes: “Commentating also means expressing an opinion. (...) I would also say to always be the third and fourth eye of the TV audience, because of course you [as a commentator who is at the stadium] can look beyond the edge of the screen (...). That means I ... try to keep an eye on the whole pitch”. Thus, entertainment is also a part of the commentator’s role, but the intensity varies across the sample.

### 4.1. The Tension between Journalistic and Entertainment Values (RQ1)

Two types of commentary styles emerged from the interviews: the emotional entertainer and the objective mediator. Of course, these are ideal types, and lines may be blurred

(see Table 1). What can be seen is that half of the commentators in the sample can be classified as objective mediators (15/30), while six can be seen as emotional entertainers. For nine commentators in the sample, this distinction cannot be made clearly, as they show characteristics of both. What can be noted is that all commentators who work for public service broadcasters see themselves as objective mediators (except for interviewee 8, who works for radio and thus constitutes a special case). Apart from this finding, there are no clear patterns following broadcasters, showing that the commentators maintain their unique styles away from who and which leagues they provide commentary for.

**Table 1.** Classification of interviewees.

Emotional Entertainer	Objective Mediator	Mix of Both
8 (ARD radio)	1 (sportdigital)	5 (DAZN)
9 (Sport1, DAZN)	2 (ARD)	6 (Sky)
18 (sportdigital)	3 (RTL, DAZN)	10 (sportdigital)
23 (Sky)	4 (Sport1, Magenta Sport)	11 (Sky)
25 (Sky)	7 (Eurosport, BR Fußball (radio))	13 (Sky)
27 (Sky)	12 (DAZN)	24 (DAZN)
	14 (Magenta Sport)	26 (DAZN)
	15 (sportdigital)	28 (Eurosport, DAZN)
	16 (ZDF)	30 (Sky)
	17 (DAZN)	
	19 (ZDF)	
	20 (ARD)	
	21 (Sky)	
	22 (ZDF)	
	29 (sportdigital)	

#### 4.1.1. The Emotional Entertainer

Interviewee 27 (Sky) emphasizes that soccer is not a serious matter but should be fun, especially for those who pay money by subscribing to pay TV: “Soccer is like cinema, and soccer has always had this basis of wanting to entertain people”. Interviewee 9 (Sport1, DAZN) said they were “an entertainer. I have to make people happy, of course I have to inform them about the most important things [...]. Apart from that, I see myself as an entertainer, as someone who gives pleasure, who transports the love for this sport”. For them, commentators who do not focus on the entertainment aspect are out of place. Interviewee 11 (Sky) agrees, as they see entertainment as a central element “in today’s age, in today’s everyday soccer”. However, it must always be authentic, they say, because the commentator must be able to ‘feel’ the match and then convey it in an entertaining way.

Other commentators also consciously focus on entertainment. Interviewee 27 (Sky) reports they are in a unique role: “I am actually the extended arm of the fan. I sit there like a fan who is looking forward to VfL Wolfsburg vs. Schalke 04 and has a certain expectation of the match”. They then commentate on their soccer matches with this expectation; with journalistic care, without expletives, but with soccer language. Interviewee 10 (sportdigital) sees it similarly: “A little bit of being a fan comes through, at least sometimes, when someone has their soccer fan heart in it, that’s also a very important aspect for me, it has to be passionate. I just want to pass on the fun I have with soccer and share it with people”. Interviewee 9 (Sport1, DAZN) sums it up: “You have to feel the match and this moment, this event [...]. It builds up over 90 min and you have to accompany it. People have to get goosebumps when they listen to you”. This is especially true for “big events, European championships, world championships”, says interviewee 23 (Sky).

The interviewed commentators agree that an expert can bring entertaining elements to the commentary that only a former professional player can know, even though a pair of commentators is still something new and unusual for the German audience (interviewee 27, Sky). As interviewee 10 (sportdigital) says: “If you have a former player who maybe played with a player in the match and then says: ‘Hey, that was a guy who just hung out



at his PlayStation in the evenings', that's a super added value that you would never find out yourself because you just don't know the player like that and you weren't there at training camp". DAZN relies on an expert for many matches to increase the entertainment factor, according to interviewee 5 (DAZN): "The goal is to offer added value in terms of entertainment. That's what we're looking for when we select the experts and analyze their feedback. To put it very casually: We don't put them there if they don't add value. Then you can save the money and put a commentator there on their own". Interviewee 13 (Sky) agrees, and for them, the dialogue with the expert has something natural about it and adds zest to the commentary. This is especially true when they get along well, as interviewee 25 (Sky) points out. Moreover, a good interplay with an expert may even elevate the commentator: "if I do a good job of ... nudging the expert along and getting them involved, I can raise myself another notch as an authority because of the expert's authority" (interviewee 1, sportdigital). Interviewee 17, an ex-professional player and expert for DAZN, believes that the higher an expert has played actively himself, the better the prerequisites of being a good expert: "I played professional soccer for many years. I have a lot of friends who are still active and play internationally or for the national team. I always join in there and try to listen in a little bit". In addition to a basic understanding of soccer, rhetorical skills are also important. Interviewee 17 also attaches great importance to knowing how a soccer match is structured by the media in order to have good timing and to speak at the appropriate moments.

Interviewee 23 (Sky) describes their role as a storyteller: "One match, 22 people. There is a result, which is exciting, but the story around the match is more interesting. When we move away from the pure result, from the pure game of tactics, of who against whom, I like to work out things that are not otherwise so common as you would expect". The same goes for interviewee 14 (Magenta Sport), who says that "I might tell that five years ago the player was a master butcher and now he's in the third division, that can be an entertaining factor". Especially in DFB-Pokal matches (the DFB-Pokal is an annual knockout competition held by the German Football Association, the DFB), in which virtually unknown amateur teams compete in the early rounds, these colorful stories are especially appropriate and in demand.

Entertainment factors are especially needed in radio, where there is no image to rely on, and where "the listener must trust the reporter" (Interviewee 8, ARD). As they say, "We need more stimuli ... And if we only have the audio way to create any kind of stimulus, then we have to try to compensate for that with all kinds of little exciting episodes, stories, impressions, puns, jokes"—and a good "goal shout", they say. In contrast to their TV colleagues, the ARD radio commentators do not actually commentate on the match for 90 min straight. Instead, they are repeatedly called in by various ARD stations throughout the match. As a result, they have to keep summarizing what is happening on the pitch, while still keeping their listeners up to date on what is happening.

The main entertainment elements mentioned by the 'emotional entertainers' are voice, language, intonation, emotions, and unexpected or interesting facts or stories. For interviewee 28 (Eurosport, DAZN), statistics are far too dry and tend to turn people off—it is all about balance. For interviewee 30 (Sky), eloquence is of high importance: "You should have certain rhetorical strengths so that you don't come across as monotonous".

#### 4.1.2. The Objective Mediator

The majority see themselves as 'classic journalists', guiding the viewers through the match by providing information to help them better understand and explaining the rules, with entertainment as a secondary aspect.

For interviewee 16 (ZDF), soccer commentary is reporting on a socially significant event. Like some of their colleagues, they therefore see themselves in a more descriptive and analytical role: "I see myself in soccer commentary less as an entertainer, and more as someone who analyzes, I mean journalistic analysis, but I still think entertainment is allowed and legitimate". Interviewee 14 (Magenta Sport) say they are in a similar role

(even though this interviewee is very much in favor of entertaining elements): “I’m a reporter. So I report on what’s happening on the ground. That’s my job”. Interviewee 12 (DAZN) explains their role even more soberly: “I see myself as a journalist. Plain and simple in the service of the audience”. Accordingly, these commentators are less concerned with entertainment than they are with clean journalistic reporting. For Interviewee 22 (ZDF), entertainment does not play a major role in their commentary, but it is an important one. They report themselves as having “the function of infotainment ... with a bit of entertainment. The focus is on information, commentating on what’s happening, not describing it, but evaluating”. Moreover, interviewee 7 (Eurosport, BR Fußball) explains: “That is the great art and the most difficult thing for a commentator in general, that they learn that what they have acquired in days or weeks of preparation, that they convey it in a measured way and that they do it in a mixture with entertainment”.

In this light of clean reporting being of prime importance, having a separate expert at the match, who comes from professional sports rather than journalism, can be detrimental to the quality of the commentary. Interviewee 12 (DAZN) says: “Most of the time you have someone sitting next to you who is not a trained commentator, who is not a trained journalist [...] because they haven’t been trained as a journalist or simply don’t have any TV skills. And sometimes that makes your job more difficult”. Working with an expert may become a skill in itself, as interviewee 27 (Sky) says: “If you commentate in pairs, you have a lot of help [...] you don’t have to do so much on your own, to put it bluntly. However, you have to be very considerate, also give the expert space, respond to them, maybe you don’t always agree with their opinion, that is advantageous and disadvantageous”. Interviewee 20 (NDR) (as well as interviewee 15 (sportdigital) and interviewee 9 (Sport1, DAZN)) agrees and sees another problem: “You also see these experts, no matter how well they’ve once played, they can’t necessarily bring this expert knowledge to the table that well and then they often end up in platitudes”. As interview 9 (Sport1, DAZN) puts it: “Experience has shown that there are not enough well-trained experts”. Interviewee 14 (Magenta Sport) summarizes the relationship between the expert and the commentator like this: “(The expert) must also have a sense for it: What’s happening in the commentary, when do I say something, when not. That’s a very sensitive interplay that not everyone can master” (also interviewee 24 (DAZN) and interviewee 16 (ZDF)).

Interviewee 6 (Sky) believes that it is not the commentator’s job to provide entertainment: “First and foremost I see the product (i.e., the match) being the focus and that is then either entertaining, sometimes less so. There are also matches where the entertainment factor doesn’t matter at all because the match is just bad”. However, they say that many commentators would find it increasingly difficult “to call a spade a spade and describe a really bad match as such”. Moreover, a commentator is not the reason why a viewer turns on the TV to watch sports; it is the match itself, says interviewee 20 (NDR). They see the match as the foundation and try to accompany it authentically: “So, I don’t say after 20 boring minutes: ‘But now I have to step on the gas, yell around here or have to scandalize some foul play, which isn’t worth it at all’, which is supported by interviewee 21 (Sky), who says “I don’t turn every 0:0 in the Bundesliga into a World Cup final”. As interviewee 29 (sportdigital) sums it up: “A sports commentator is a little more than a good waiter. That means they stand out a bit, in a positive way, but they don’t push themselves too much into the foreground”. Interviewee 3 (RTL, DAZN) also makes it clear that commentators who consciously see themselves as entertainers should not get carried away: “It shouldn’t get out so of hand that commentator only sees him- or herself in the role of entertainer and only tries to make jokes and maybe takes themselves more important than the soccer match”. Alternatively, as interviewee 26 (DAZN) says: “If I think I have to play first fiddle as a commentator, then I can do stand-up comedy instead”.

While being an emotional entertainer or an objective mediator is something the commentators often attribute to their own style, there are constraints that influence their choice of commentary style.

#### 4.2. Perception of Constraints (RQ2)

There are two factors that constrain the commentator: the nature of the match and the context of the broadcaster.

##### 4.2.1. Nature of the Match

It should be noted that the commentary for a soccer match varies depending on the team pairing and the competition. For example, public service broadcasters and RTL often show matches involving the German national team. Ratings are above average, especially during World Cup and European Championship tournaments, and many people who are otherwise not so enthusiastic about soccer tune in. As interviewee 3 (RTL, DAZN) says: “You can’t assume that all people at home have that much knowledge. You have to focus more on entertaining elements, because a lot of people do not watch for the sport, but for the entertainment. Especially during the world and European championships”.

This approach is different for matches that are mostly watched by fans of the teams. Interviewee 21 (Sky) puts it in a nutshell: “I broadcast (...) two Bundesliga club teams, then there are two fan camps. So I have Frankfurt on one side and Schalke on the other, they know one hundred percent what is going on. They know the match, they know the rules, they know the table, they know all the players. In that respect, I don’t have to explain as much as perhaps other colleagues who work for public television”. Interviewee 28 (Eurosport, DAZN) agrees: “Most people can easily commentate on Bayern vs. Dortmund. I do not even need to have the line-ups in front of me. I know everything about the teams and around that match ... I do not need to be able to do magic there”.

On the other hand, for matches in lower leagues the commentators have a different approach. Interviewee 14 (Magenta Sport) explains: “If I have a match with two unknown teams from a lower league ... I try to introduce the players more to the viewers and also show the attractiveness of these teams with entertaining background stories”. Interviewee 9 (Sport1, DAZN) has a vivid example: “When you’re doing matches like that, you’re trying to find out if there’s a collapsing bratwurst stand or whatnot”. However, according to interviewee 13 (Sky), the commentator should always go into a match with the same approach as for a big match and not belittle or ridicule an encounter with weaker teams. At smaller broadcasters, i.e., broadcasters that generate less reach as they do not broadcast the most popular matches or leagues, namely Sport1, Eurosport, Magenta Sport, and sportdigital in the sample, the audience is even more diverse. There are viewers who tune in specifically to follow their club from foreign leagues, such as from the Netherlands or Portugal, or even from Russia or India—they know their team and do not need much guidance. However, there are other viewers who are not as familiar with these teams and who also tune in to watch the match. Bringing these audience expectations together is a difficult task for interviewee 18 (sportdigital) and his colleagues. Interviewee 18 says the commentator is “an informer who first has to make sure that the audience can follow them”. In the commentary, entertaining and unusual aspects are particularly suitable for highlighting something special and thus inspiring the viewers and keeping them tuned in.

##### 4.2.2. Context of the Commentator

It is also important whether the reporter covers the match from the stadium or remotely. In the stadium, the reporter is able to emotionally involve the audience in the event, talking about fan chants, stadium choreography and emotions. However, the Sky commentators, for example, are often not at the stadium, but at Sky’s headquarters in Unterföhring near Munich, and they cannot convey the atmosphere in the same way.

It is also more difficult to get information when commenting remotely. At smaller broadcasters such as sportdigital, who report from a studio in Hamburg rather than from the field, the commentators have to make sure that the relevant information is correct before the match starts, as they often have to rely on data from the internet, such as the line-ups of foreign leagues, which they sometimes do not receive until shortly before the match. As interviewee 10 (sportdigital) says: “You don’t get any statistics from OPTA [soccer data

provider], you don't get a folder with 80 pages, you have to look for everything yourself and then you have to do a lot of research to know: 'Where do I find my information?' This is also true for our sometimes very exotic leagues. From my point of view, it's very important, especially for us, to be a little crazy about it". This also applies to regional matches, as interviewee 4 (Sport1, Magenta Sport) reports: "Regional league means a lot of phone calls, a lot of preparation, asking for help: 'Can you give me some information? Where can I read up on this? What can you guys tell me? When can I call the coach?'. The commentators from the smaller broadcasters thus consciously set themselves apart. They make sure they know the basics about the foreign leagues they commentate on through intensive research of many details about teams, players, stadiums, cities, and fans. They also consciously make use of entertainment elements, more so than their counterparts from the bigger broadcasters. They tell side stories, focus on star players, tell anecdotes about players, and make references to Germany where appropriate. As interviewee 18 (sportdigital) elaborates: "Sure, you have 22 players and a result, but the whole package around it always looks different. [...] You can pick out something everywhere, which initially also makes the difference to watch us [i.e., sportdigital]. It's almost compulsory, because we can't keep up with Sky and the like, with the Bundesliga". They thus, for example, focus on star players: "The audience doesn't necessarily watch the Chinese league because Chinese soccer is so great, but because international stars play there and the focus is then more on them" (interviewee 29, sportdigital), or on a relationship with German soccer: "If, for example, he (a player) played in the Bundesliga, that will make people's brains click: 'Ah, the name somehow still means something to me and now the commentator tells me that he played for FSV Frankfurt in 2010'" (interviewee 10, sportdigital). In fact, interviewee 18 (sportdigital) comes to the following conclusion: "If you really look at it, you can really get a lot out of it [i.e., side stories]. Just [stories] away from soccer. I think we, as a small private broadcaster, have to pay even more attention to that".

The style of commentary also depends on the broadcaster's guidelines and the audience. In particular, the way the audience is addressed varies from one employer to the next. Interviewee 26 (DAZN) must adapt depending on the channel they are commentating for: "From the beginning, the rule was: We address the audience at DAZN in an informal way [German 'Du']. I know it is different from BR [Bayerischer Rundfunk], they address the audience in a formal way [German 'Sie']". The formal address of the audience is a clear specification at ARD and ZDF in order to convey distance and professionalism (interviewees 19 (ZDF) and 20 (ARD)). Interviewee 5 (DAZN) explains that DAZN is concerned with addressing the audience and the commentators in a consistent way: "I created this with my colleagues at the time when DAZN was founded, a kind of guideline, a commentator's guide. And of course we used it to think about how we wanted to do commentary at DAZN. How we wanted the commentators to work. But it's just a rough guideline". Sky also has guidelines for commentators. However, according to interviewee 23 (Sky), this only has a minor influence on the style of the commentators, such as not calling colleagues by their nicknames, which is perceived as being too chummy with the audience (also interviewees 11 and 13). DAZN is the only broadcaster with a written commentator guide, and all other broadcasters in the sample only have verbal directions—if any at all, as Eurosport, Sport1, Magenta Sport, and sportdigital do not regulate their commentators' style. All in all, no commentator feels limited in their choice of words. There is, of course, a limit concerning sexist and discriminatory language.

The audience does not play the biggest role for the commentators, as interviewee 15 (sportdigital) says (also interviewee 20, NDR): "So you can't please all viewers, it is what it is. In this respect, you can only broadcast what you yourself consider to be good entertainment or good company". Interviewee 16 (ZDF) said that they received many letters, some of which express completely contradictory wishes regarding the type of commentary. On the one hand, there are viewers who want stories, slogans, and additional information, but on the other hand, there are many viewers who do not want any of that.

According to interviewee 16, it is important to find a middle ground while remaining true to one's own style.

Some commentators compare their commentary style and that of their colleagues with styles from abroad and find clear differences in how the role of entertainment is handled. They find that live commentary in other countries is more emotional than in Germany, and interviewee 3 (RTL, DAZN) believes this is because it is socially accepted in countries like the U.S.: "We are in a country that watches and perceives soccer a little bit differently than other countries or spectators in other countries. We don't go crazy for 90 min". Interviewee 1 (sportdigital) used to do commentary for an American sports channel and found that "they always have a co-commentator, they always make a big show out of everything. ... The presenter, the host, really tickles the ivories before the start of a show and says: 'This and that is what you can expect. We're going to get to the moon today and show you this and that, and these superstars are coming'". They say the U.S. has a much closer relationship between athletes and the media in their sports, resulting in more entertaining content because of access to behind-the-scenes coverage. Interviewee 1 (sportdigital) compares this to Germany: "That's what the Americans do, and that's what's so rigid in our country, which is unfortunate".

All in all, although each commentator has a unique commentary style, they also have to take a few things into consideration to adapt to the circumstances of the match.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

A central result is the assessment of the importance of journalistic values over entertainment values (RQ1). While all interviewees see themselves as a companion who narrates the match, entertainment is only of primary importance for a minority. The role of the commentator ranges from 'emotional entertainer' to 'objective mediator'. Entertainment-oriented commentators want to excite and engage viewers through their voice, language, and emotions. Reporters who see themselves more in the role of a 'classic journalist' use significantly less entertainment elements in their commentary and do not want to elevate an otherwise boring match just for the sake of entertainment (see [Grimmer and Horky 2011](#)). Surprisingly, the majority of the sample can be classified as the latter. They thus do not see themselves as 'fans' (see [Schultz Jørgensen 2005](#)), but rather as journalists who happen to be enthusiastic about the game and who see the journalistic reporting of the match as paramount ([Bölz 2018](#), pp. 107–8; [Wiske 2017](#), p. 26).

However, entertainment—in small doses—is also part of the toolbox of the objective mediators. What can be attested here is that the objective mediators seem to assume the "enriching" value ([Perreault and Bell 2022](#)), using entertaining inside information when needed, but not putting it front and center. Thus, as a commentator, one has to be a jack of all trades, trying to fulfill not only an entertaining role of being original, quick-witted, or spontaneous ([Wiske 2017](#), p. 127), but also [Mast's](#) (2004, p. 476) four basic journalistic skills of expertise, technical competence, mediation competence, and organizational competence. Therefore, a balance is needed in order to narrate the match with broad soccer knowledge and with concise analysis, which may include one's opinion ([Lang 2009](#)).

With the increasing competition over broadcasting rights, which has also reached the German TV live soccer market, the majority of the commentators in this study do not follow the path of prioritizing entertainment over journalistic values, as can be found in other sports and countries (see [Whannel 2009](#)). This is also true for the commentators on streaming services that rely solely on subscription revenue and would have every reason to respond to economic pressures with more dramatized forms of commentary. Thus, the majority of the interviewees challenge the notion of the "toy department" ([Rowe 2007](#)), for example by emphasizing the amount of careful research that has to be done before the match, especially for leagues from abroad.

In terms of constraints, the context of the match, i.e., the nature of the match, and the context of the broadcaster, i.e., resources and commentary guidelines, must be taken into account by the commentators, and are decisive criteria for how much entertainment



is included in the commentary (RQ2). For example, matches with lesser-known teams may require more explanation, or even more colorful facts, and thus more preliminary research that commentators might have to conduct themselves—again, these are classic journalistic tasks that require the respective skills. Smaller broadcasters, who are increasingly broadcasting matches from lesser-known leagues, must therefore focus more on the entertainment factor and find interesting information outside of the match—the frame of the match (Barnfield 2013) shifts in an effort to draw audiences in (and keep them in front of the screen). In addition, the broadcaster's guidelines affect the commentator's approach, regulating issues such as how to address the audience, as it is the case with DAZN.

All in all, we found that providing just the right amount of journalistic and entertainment values in a commentary is a subjective phenomenon that can never be done 'right' because it is never possible to satisfy the entire audience. Who to serve? This is a crucial question, and one that always involves a trade-off: one cannot commentate to everyone's satisfaction, as the interviewees note, because viewers' assessments of the same commentary and the tools used often diverge widely—because expectations diverge, commentators are expected to do everything perfectly, which is doomed from the start (Flügel 2009, p. 212). It is perhaps easiest with national team matches, where many casual fans watch to be entertained, not to be lectured on tactics or player histories—these matches embody modern live media sport and its event-centered nature (Bertling 2009). Thus, drawing in audiences for smaller matches might be harder at first sight—however, as said by the interviewees of the smaller broadcasters, they serve small, yet "soccer crazy" audiences, and they gladly do their intense research of players and club abroad for them, in the interest of providing interesting color commentary which is supposed to keep audiences with their channels (see Lee et al. 2016). Developing strategies which set broadcasters and streaming services apart will become of even higher importance the more soccer broadcasting becomes fragmented, as, for example, even more streaming services buy rights. However, broadcasters and streaming services might have to think about their own added value for the audience even more, but individual commentators may also strive to become their own brand. Of course, this might not apply to these objective mediators, who are firm in taking a step back and see the soccer match in the foreground, but may apply for the emotional entertainers. Objective mediators—and those broadcasters who favor this type of presentation—might rely even more on 'classic' reporting to stand out.

In any case, soccer is the number one sport on German TV, so from the point of view of sports journalism and sports communication, it is essential for live TV commentators to think about how to use their craft and how to engage the audience. Entertainment values do have their firm place for the commentators in the sample, but are not the main focus. In fact, it seems that compared to their colleagues from other countries, German TV live commentators generally seem to be reserved when using entertainment and use it in small doses, indicating that there is indeed a German commentary style (for the opposite approach, see Lee et al.'s 2016 recommendations for the Republic of Korea). This can also be seen in the reluctance when using an expert as a co-commentator, which is a staple in other countries—only DAZN regularly makes use of them, and they say that many variables have to be satisfied for this to work. We thus propose further systematic research into different commentary cultures, which many of the commentators are aware of, especially when they have worked abroad, but which have not been thoroughly examined by academic studies. Moreover, we would like to propose taking a deeper look at the 'objective mediators' and how they shape TV sports commentary practice, as they seem to be a journalistic stronghold in a medium that increasingly favors entertainment aspects.

How to present oneself and which values to uphold is of clear importance to the interviewed commentators. This is crucial because a commentator can make TV history: Tom Bartel's commentary on Mario Götze's winning goal in the 2014 World Cup final is known to many Germans and will probably never be forgotten by soccer fans, and the same applies to the words of Herbert Zimmermann in 1954, of Rudi Michel in 1974, and of Gerd Rubenbauer in 1990, who all commented on the World Cup finals won by Germany.

The next TV reporter to commentate on a German World Cup victory is also likely to create a collective memory with his or her words.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, J.K. and P.K.; Methodology, J.K. and P.K.; Formal analysis, P.K.; Investigation, J.K. and P.K.; Data curation, P.K.; Writing—original draft, J.K.; Writing—review & editing, J.K. and P.K.; Supervision, J.K.; Project administration, P.K. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study did not undergo formal ethical review and approval as this process was not available at the host institution at the time of the study, and not the norm in Germany. Nevertheless, the interviewees were fully consented and informed of their rights before participating in the study. Anonymity was assured, and they were why the research is being conducted and how their data will be used.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

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

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest. Peer Kuni was not employed by or affiliated with Sky Sports at the time of the conduction of the study.

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