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Reference:

Robeers Timothy.- 'We go green in Beijing' : situating live television, urban motor sport and environmental sustainability by means of a framing analysis of TV broadcasts of Formula E
Sport in society - ISSN 1743-0437 - 22:12(2019), p. 2089-2103
Full text (Publisher's DOI): <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2018.1558212>
To cite this reference: <https://hdl.handle.net/10067/1591280151162165141>

‘We go green in Beijing’: situating live television, urban motor sport and environmental sustainability by means of a framing analysis of TV broadcasts of Formula E

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ABSTRACT

In 2014, the fully electric racing series Formula E, aimed at promoting clean energy and sustainability, was launched in Beijing (China), at that time the world’s most polluted city. Despite Formula E’s sustainability credentials, the question remains whether one of its core values, i.e. environmental sustainability (ES), is picked up on by sports television broadcasters. Using a qualitative framing analysis, I identified, compared and contrasted frames, and the significance of ES herein, in three UK broadcasts of Formula E’s first three season opening races. Results indicate that, although the narrative of ES was introduced minimally during the inaugural broadcast, ES was neglected as a frame during consecutive broadcasts. Results suggest that this is because sports broadcasters prefer audiences to align Formula E according to more traditional values and ideas associated with broadcasting of motor sport, and, as such, to avoid affecting, i.e. reducing, audience confidence and ratings

KEYWORDS

Formula E; live-TV broadcasting; environmental sustainability; framing approach; agenda setting

Introduction

Race commentator Jack Nichols’s ‘We go green in Beijing’ signified the start of the FIA Formula E championship race in Beijing in 2014. Formula E, fully electric and visually similar to Formula One, is the Fédération Internationale de l’Automobile’s (FIA) latest sustainability incentive to accommodate a changing environmental and political climate by ‘provid[e] a framework for research and development centered around the electric vehicle to promote clean energy and [environmental] sustainability’ (ES) (FIA Formula E 2015). In that light, Nichols’ ‘going green’ statement reveals a potential ambiguity. It denotes both the starting grid lights turning green and, bearing in mind Formula E’s much (self-)pro-claimed eco-credentials (Chauhan 2015; Robeers and Van den Bulck 2018), or an increase in ES. Indeed, motor sport has long suffered from negative criticisms because of its unsustainable patterns of consumption contributing to global environmental change which, more recently, emission scandals like Diesel Gate have highlighted (Dingle 2009). This has increased scrutiny of the industry and has left a profound mark on the motor racing landscape with manufacturers such as Volkswagen and subsidiary brands Audi and Porsche having pulled out of major motor sport commitments such as, for example, their exit from

the World Endurance Championship series-leading LMP1-class (Le Mans Prototype 1). Instead, they enter Formula E as a means to redirect operations (and legitimacy) as a function of electric vehicle (hereafter: EV) development. Thus, for motor sport to survive as a competitive platform for automotive design and innovation, it has had to increase efforts to resolve its environmental problems. Consequently, the motor sport governing body FIA's Institute for Motor Sport Safety (FIAIMSS) expanded its activity continuously from 2007 onwards to include ES and stimulate

research into sustainability, disseminate[ing] the results of that research and provide[ing] information on the best environmental procedures, practices and technologies that can be applied to motor sport. [...] cover areas such as vehicle design and technology [...] emissions monitoring and control [...] energy optimization and storage [...] (Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile Institute for Motor Sport Safety 2009).

ES has gained in popularity on a global scale due to its symbiotic relationship with the media, i.e. the media sustain themselves by picking novel issues which in turn provides those issues (e.g. ES-related topics such as deforestation, climate change, etc.) with exposure (Lester 2010; Cox 2012). For a novel sport such as Formula E, media exposure is key for generating awareness through the media, as a majority of people that watch sports do so first and foremost through (a combination of) media, i.e. radio, newspapers, magazines, social media and television coverage of the sports and its wider points of interest (Boyle and Haynes 2009). Television coverage in particular is very much part of the sports experience as it allows for top motor sport series to be used as platforms for sponsors to showcase their brands and products (Evans 2014; Noble and Hughes 2004). Well aware of the fact that 'sports rights in themselves influence sports news coverage' (Helland 2007, 106), Formula E has provided broadcasters with free access to broadcasting rights, hoping this will expose the series to global audiences (Chauhan 2015). In trying to communicate this message, some level of control over what is being shown during the main race broadcast is effectively taken away from broadcasters as the visual feed and any replay are provided by the series' own broadcasting director (Evans 2014), in this case from Formula E. However, ultimately, it is the media that control the amount and kind of coverage and, thus, the visibility of Formula E and its ES-related efforts, by providing live race commentating and supplemental pre- and post-race footage (either studio based or on-track based). Therefore, and by means of a case study and framing approach, this paper wants to, (1) ascertain *if ES features in the live broadcast of Formula E*, (2) study *how the motor racing series Formula E and ES are represented (i.e. framed) in the coverage of 3 live television broadcasts in the UK* as well as (3) provide a conceptually and theoretically based interpretation of why the resulting frames have emerged as they have. In doing so, it draws and combines insights from environmental communication, media studies and (motor) sport studies.

Literature review

In what follows, we will first discuss the current position ES holds in British society, followed by an elaboration on motor sport and ES in the sports-media complex.

Public consciousness of ES in the UK

The United Nations Brundtland report (1988, 3) defines ES as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their

own needs'. In 1998, the Kyoto Protocol indicated a turnaround moment as 'in order to take appropriate adaptive measures, [...] one must [first] recognise that one is at risk' (Taylor, Dessai, and Bruine de Bruine 2014, 3). Following this global acknowledgement of ES, the UK government was the first to adopt appropriate legislation and are expected by the UK public to deal with environmental issues on their behalf (Taylor et al. 2014; Lorenzoni, Nicholson-Cole, and Whitmarsh 2007). According to Taylor et al. (2014), this is due to the UK public showing greater psychological distance to these issues due to limited immediate implications. Indeed, most UK 'laypeople' consider environmental implications applicable to the more 'vulnerable' in the world and future generations (Lorenzoni and Pidgeon 2006, 87). Another study by Parkhill et al. (2013, 33) for the UKERC (UK Energy Research Centre) confirms both the awareness of ES as well as the lack of general individual engagement by the UK public but, additionally, reveals a core aspiration to move away from a total reliance on fossil fuels to more sustainable alternatives. As such, Parkhill et al. (2013, 15) found the UK public to closely associate EV's with being green and environmentally 'good' with 54% of respondents willing to switch to EV's and 75% should EV performance equal or better current models. Subsequently, this indicates that environmental concerns 'are not key determinants in the public's choice of transport technologies' (O'Garra, Mourato, and Pearson 2005, 651) and that despite a widespread awareness of ES, relevant UK public engagement remains scarce.

ES media coverage in the UK

Cox (2012) states that due to the limited experiences of the UK public and the 'invisibility' of environmental issues and sustainability, the public is largely dependent on stories about the climate and sustainability by media sources, which have been shown to be neither innocent nor neutral in their representations. The 'visualization' of this invisibility of issues requires much communicative work as, inherently, news (i.e. including ES) 'is largely event focused and event driven' which impacts 'which environmental issues get coverage and which don't' (Hansen 2010, 95–6). Indeed, Boykoff (2011) identified a fivefold quantitative increase in (UK broadsheet newspaper) coverage of event-based environmental issues (e.g. climate change) occurring across four periods between 2000 and 2010, despite a decline in circulation (Cox 2012). These were initiated by, among others, (1) the COP6 in The Hague in November 2000, (2) the G8 Gleneagles (Scotland) summit in July 2005, (3) the release of *An Inconvenient truth* (Al Gore) in September 2006, the COP12 in November 2006 and (4) the COP15 in Copenhagen (Denmark) as well as the UAE CRU email scandal (Climate Gate) both at the end of 2009. This is of significant importance for ES as Boykoff (2011, 20) directly links these events to 'ongoing stories of [...] sustainability [...] and the like'. He further identifies two associated problems, namely (1) a lack of story context creating 'missed critical opportunities to advance the climate story' (Boykoff 2011, 96) and (2) a framing in terms of socio-political and economic concerns regarding the implementation of environmental policies. The latter also corresponds to Carvalho's (2005, 21) implications that UK quality newspaper coverage 'remains within the broad ideological parameters of free-market capitalism and neo-liberalism, avoiding a sustained critique of the possibility of constant economic growth and increasing consumption [...]'.

Despite a significant number of studies having looked at UK media coverage of range of environmental issues, the focus has so far bypassed (sports) television coverage and ES, a gap this study aims to address.

The (motor) sports-media complex

Helland (2007, 105–106) claims that the relationship between sports and the media has led to the development of the ‘sports/media complex’, a term conceived by Jhally (1989), and is the result of a commercialization of television through new technologies and enhanced social developments. As such, ‘television has generated the proverbial pot of gold’ (Kidd 2013, 443) for sporting events such as Formula One and the Olympics. The sports/media complex, furthermore, is symbiotic: media coverage of sporting events are first and foremost important from a self-promotion point of view in the sense that broadcasters apply strategic measures to draw in audiences for their advertisers—thus safeguarding time, pecuniary and resource investments. This, in turn, helps to raise the sport’s appeal and value (Helland 2007; Kidd 2013). Crabbe and Brown (2004) confirm that it is of vital importance to maintain the ability to sell sports as an authentic or nostalgic (viewing) experience for audiences. In their research on stock car racing, Roy, Goss, and Jubenville (2010) found that motor racing values such as action (drama on the track), the speed of the race and the reputation of a series are crucial for audiences’ interest. For this symbiotic relationship to be successful, it must be balanced. However, Helland (2007) posits a paradox: the media constitute great potential for exposure but are also weak at safeguarding journalistic ideals, e.g. variety of topics, because broadcasting rights (and accompanying sponsorship requirements) still serve to frame what ought to be covered. In Formula E’s case, free access to its broadcasting rights will most likely (cf. Chauhan 2015) generate increased exposure, but considering broadcasters’ predefined time and content restraints which limit the selection of relevant stories (Lewis and Weaver 2015), it remains to be seen if this will indeed positively impact exposure of Formula E’s ES efforts. Therefore, this article will look at *where the focus of the live broadcast of Formula E lies*.

Environmental sustainability in the (motor) sports-media complex

A considerable amount of academic literature focuses on citizens’ growing awareness of ES as a means to reduce harmful practices on society and its implementation in the world of sport (Sheth and Babiak 2010). In the case of motor sport, Haase-Reed, Kushin, and Koeppel (2007) found that, as a result of a socially responsible sport starting to acknowledge its own ecological footprint and developing appropriate policies, media increasingly focus on ES in sports despite it suffering from a limited newsworthiness, i.e. a limited ability to attract readers (Cox 2012). In general, ES can make it into the media as a novelty and event-driven entity but loses significance as exposure decreases (Lester 2010; Cox 2012). Still, by focusing more on ES in sport, the media can pressure sporting businesses and organizations (e.g. FIA and Formula E) by monitoring and scrutinizing their (ES) efforts, or by means of positively communicating corporations’ ES efforts along with commitments to stakeholders (Trendafilova, Babiak, and Heinze 2013). Hassan and O’Kane (2011) looked into (the media coverage of) the Dakar Rally and its impact on the development of environmental Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) within motor sports. They show that the organizers of the Dakar Rally implemented CSR by means of the ‘Actions Dakar Project’ which was scrutinized by the media and environmental organizations as a smokescreen to reduce criticism. This paper aims to examine *to what extent live television broadcasting picks up on and monitors*

Formula E's ES efforts, i.e. to what extent television broadcasting of Formula E considers ES as newsworthy, and to what extent it monitors the sports' ES efforts?

Theoretical framework: sports-media framing

An important factor of sports- media research is analysing how audiences are encouraged to think about what the media suggest or, in other words, how a topic which is selected by the media to become news is presented to audiences (Scheufele 1999; Lester 2010). As such, a framing paradigm provides an ideal option for two reasons. First, framing theory has a deep-rooted tradition in mediated sports research and has been used by many researchers analysing sports (media) companies on the basis of rendered frames (Turner 2014). Second, it provides a productive approach for comparative and longitudinal research. Framing, then, can be understood as 'selecting certain aspects of a perceived reality in order to make them more salient and, in doing so, promote a problem definition, a causal interpretation, a moral evaluation and a treatment recommendation' (Entman 1993, 52), whereby the latter four function as reasoning devices (Entman 1993; Van Gorp 2010) alongside framing devices (lexicon, catchphrases, depictions and stereotypes) (Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Van Gorp 2010) to make up frames. As an inherent part of framing, frames refer to 'persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual' (Gitlin 1980, 7). Furthermore, by selecting what to emphasize and what to exclude, the media can influence the messages the audience receives by providing them with a suggested meaning which is the consequence of the effect of power relations (Cheek 2004; Van Gorp 2004).

Recently, sports journalism has been evolving into a hybrid model that combines traditional reporting styles with social media which, subsequently, allows for (1) more opportunities for journalists to draft stories in a way that uses different frames as information about athletes, teams and the sport itself become more readily available and (2) an increasingly dominant overlap of sports coverage, entertainment and celebrity (Schultz and Sheffer 2010; Lewis and Weaver 2015). Indeed, a study by Lewis and Weaver (2015) states that sports media stories are traditionally grounded in an overarching performance frame. Despite this move to a hybrid model, and although media producers most often do not intentionally choose certain frames over others (Van Gorp 2010), they are still limited by time and/or content restraints and can only select a limited number of relevant stories (cf. Lewis and Weaver 2015). Another study by Robeers and Van den Bulck (2018) analysed the representation of Formula E's ES efforts in British and Flemish newspapers and reveals that ES did not constitute a dominant frame but appeared as part of other frames of Formula E. Yet it did constitute one counter-frame, namely Formula E as 'a green farce' whereby, as a solution, ES rather necessitates a celebratory and critical approach. This bears some implications for the representation of ES during broadcasts of Formula E as, on the one hand, the increased potential for new frames as a result of the hybrid model could allow for the inclusion of ES. Yet, on the other hand, the time (i.e. allocated timeslot) and content restraints (cf. traditional motor racing values) set out by the producers could still hamper inclusion. Based on these notions, this study analyses *if, how and to what extent journalists incorporate ES frames in reporting and or continue to use more traditional frames.*

Methodology

Although sometimes criticized for its ‘wider academic relevance which is hampered by its own idiosyncrasies’ (Flyvbjerg 2006), there exists some compelling reasoning to adopt a case study approach. First, and as defined by Yin (2014), the distinctive need for utilizing a case study approach emerges from a desire to comprehend one or more complex, social and contemporary phenomenon, e.g. it enables a more in-depth analysis of relationships between the media and sport with respect to the debate on the environment (Flyvbjerg 2006). As such, it is perfectly suited to answer questions that deal with operational links needing to be viewed diachronically (Yin 2017) and, additionally, allows for an exhaustive overview of frames present in a sample of media texts (Van den Bulck and Claessens 2013). As such, a longitudinal and single-case study design was selected that allowed for the same single case, i.e. the Formula E season opening race broadcast¹, to be examined at three one-year intervals (Yin 2014; Yin 2017). The selection criteria are fourfold. (1) All broadcasts are identical in format (i.e. season opening races) and allow for a more specific longitudinal view than a random selection of races during the same period would provide, (2) the first race of each new season is most likely to carry the most magnitude as it includes new information regarding the racing series (technology, rules and regulations and possibly ES), (3) the sample includes races in South-East Asia (Beijing and Hong Kong) which still has the highest level of deaths due to air pollution on the planet (World Health Organisation 2018) and might instigate ES commentary, and (4) all broadcasts are produced from a UK perspective, grounded in the country’s world-leading motor sport industry (House of Commons Business, Innovation and Skill Committee 2010). An important consideration is that, despite the abovementioned motivations, the sample still maintains some level of pragmatism and other broadcasts not included here might indeed yield deviating results.

The sample consists of the 2014 ITV 4² Beijing Formula ePrix, the 2015 ITV 4 Beijing Formula EPrix and the 2016 Channel 5³ Hong Kong Formula EPrix. Primary data were sampled from both television and online platforms. The first ITV 4 as well the Channel 5 broadcasts were accessed by means of a live recording on 13 September 2014 and 09 October 2016, respectively. The second ITV 4 broadcast was accessed through Youtube on 24 October 2016. During a first part, the sample was coded inductively and comprised of all three stages of coding as set out by Van Gorp (2010). During open coding, all data were assigned codes with the smallest unit of analysis for coding being a set of sentences that created a meaningful segment, which usually included a number of sentences but were, in some instances, just one or two. Next, axial coding required data comparison and contrasting with the aim of unearthing similarities and patterns. During the stage of selective coding, overall consistencies were combined into frame packages and assigned a frame name (Gamson and Modigliani 1989).

Frame salience was operationalized in frequency of occurrence and frame relationships, i.e. dominant, secondary, counter (Zhou and Moy 2007). As a means of reflection (Shenton 2004), the second, i.e. deductive, part of the analysis featured revisiting the sampled data with the frames generated to ensure a high level of applicability (Van Gorp 2010).

Finally, a note on the author’s position indicates previous involvement in motor sport, both as a fan and driver. Although not a British national, the author has spent a considerable amount of time in the UK, participating in and studying British automotive and (motor) sport culture. Such practical understanding undoubtedly helps provide additional context against which to generate and interpret this study’s findings.

Formatting the race broadcasts

A preliminary analysis of the live broadcasts gave a clear insight into the returning structure of the broadcasts. Each consisted of three macro-sections often associated with live broadcasting of motor sport (Evans 2013), i.e. a pre-race section that included free practice, qualifying and pre-race pit walk and grid walk; a race section featuring commentary accompanied by the actual race footage; and a post-race section in which the race is analysed. Each macro-section constituted a sub-unit of analysis for the identification of frames which allowed for a more thorough comparison of the broadcasts.

Findings and discussion

The qualitative framing analysis resulted in eight frames, which functioned as dominant, secondary, counter-frames or sub-frames or a combination of these depending on the individual broadcast. It also generated some quantitative results. Table 1 shows that the pre-race sections of all three broadcasts contain the largest variety of frames. Similarly, the race sections of the first two broadcasts featured an identical set and number of frames (four in both 2014 and 2015) with the 2016 race section featuring additional frames (seven in 2016). The post-race section shows a more equal spread of frames across all broadcasts (three in both 2014 and 2015 and three in 2016). Last, two frames (i.e. ‘Generating Safety’ and ‘A Strong Ecological Message’) are not present in every broadcast, while three other frames (i.e. ‘Audience Involvement’, ‘Generating Conflict’ and ‘Proper Motor sport’) feature in the same macro-sections of each broadcast with the latter two being present in all broadcasts.

On the basis of the overall group of frames reconstructed from the data (see Table 2), three important divisions can be made.

A first division relates to the single ES frame ‘strong ecological message’ present in the pre-race section of the 2014 ITV 4 broadcast and functions as a secondary frame and as a sub-frame to the ‘novelty’ frame, which will be discussed later. Considering the unique status of the ‘strong ecological message’ frame within the larger set of frames, a closer look at this frame seems necessary. The dominant issue presented in this frame is that Formula E carries a message of ES for the future which is attributed to a greater relevance for people as awareness of ES is increasingly part of people’s lives (Lester 2010): ‘Everyone’s looking at hybrid technologies and sustainability for the future and this is a series which brings it to the forefront of everyone’s mind’ and ‘We bring a strong ecological message’ (ITV 4 FIA Formula E Live 2014). The suggested consequence of this is that Formula E has gained

Table 1. Overview of frame occurrence found per macro-section of each broadcast.

	2014 ITV 4			2015 ITV 4			2016 Channel 5		
	Pre-	Race	Post-	Pre-	Race	Post-	Pre-	Race	Post-
Challenge	□	□			□	□	□	□	
Facing the Unknown	□			□			□	□	
Novelty	□			□			□	□	
Audience Involvement	□	□		□	□		□	□	
Generating Conflict	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□
Generating Safety			□				□	□	
Proper Motor Sport	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□
Strong ecological message	□								
Total Number of Frames	7	4	3	5	4	3	7	7	2

Table 2. Signature matrix with frames, and the related framing and reasoning devices, to interpret the framing of ES and Formula E in live broadcasting of Formula E.

Frame-Cultural Theme	Issue/problem	Reasoning devices			Words	Framing devices		
		Cause	Solution	Moral evaluation		Stereotypes/ metaphors	Catchphrases	Depictions ...
Challenge-Hardship brings out the best	It is difficult to set up and participate in a new series	Time constraints and outsider cynicism	The need to persevere	Positive—Everyone involved has done their best	Tough, challenging, pressure to perform	Hurdles to overcome	/	Managing the strategy as the race goes on must be challenging ... the land of the unknown
Facing the unknown-Uncertainty makes people uneasy	Organizers/ participants have no frame of reference	Formula E is untried and untested	Practical experience diminishes the unknown	Positive—time will tell	the start of the season, a real unknown	[drivers need to] read the waves	expect the unexpected	...
Novelty change	Stimulating change in technology through sport	The need to look at new ES/ hybrid technology for the future'	Pushing technology through competition	Positive—the perfect way to develop these technologies	New, future	the race car of today is the street car of tomorrow	a new and different way of going about motor sport	... a framework for R&D around the electric vehicle
Audience involvement –Anyone can help	Help TV audiences get involved with motor sport	TV audiences lacked the means to engage with motor sport	Audiences should use online and social media platforms	Positive—the great process of FanBoost	join, involvement, #FanBoost'	/	Get involved	... sometimes fans make the difference
Frame-Cultural Theme	Issue/problem	Reasoning devices			Words	Framing devices		
		Cause	Solution	Moral evaluation		Stereotypes/ metaphors	Catchphrases	Depictions ...
Generating conflict-Drama	People will get upset	Sport is a symbolic arena where drama unfolds	Deal with it—winning/losing as inherent to sport	Positive—no feeling sorry	Battling, pulled the trigger, pole position shootout	The track as a battlefield	highs and lows of motor racing	... friends now, but [...] for how much longer?
Generating safety-The well-being of athletes	Accidents on track (will) happen	The inherent dangers of motor sport	Quick/correct decision making saves lives	Largely positive—based on the handling of each incident	Dangerous, serious safety issue	motor sport is dangerous it's at every ticket	/	... now we just see how safe the cars are
Proper motor sport-Motor racing values/ entertainment	Motor sport audiences bring high expectations to Formula E	Formula E aims to be at the pinnacle of its field	Formula E will need to deliver on these expectations	Confirming the quality of the series	very professional, cracking move	close[ness] great for racing	one of the toughest grids in the world	... how breathless Formula E racing is, sportsman-ship is a part of this series
Strong ecological message-Protecting the environment	Development of sustainable technologies creates relevance	Audiences increasingly care about ES in society	Formula E must continue bringing ES technology to people's attention	Very positive – approving of Formula E's ES efforts	ecological, environment, sustainability	Formula E brings it [ES] to the forefront of everyone's	motor sport is leading the way	... Formula E as a platform for environmentally sustainable

traction globally, regardless of standing and as confirmation that ES is relevant to Formula E, motor sport as a whole as well as to mankind's future. It 'has invited a lot of big players with the likes of Leonardo DiCaprio saying he wanted to be involved' (ITV 4 FIA Formula E Live 2014). ES achieves this because can successfully attract and deploy celebrities which, as commodities, strengthen and mobilize new and existing support and, as such, facilitate environmental profiling for Formula E (Lester 2010). The moral evaluation is significantly positive, both in terms of commentator discourse as in interviewee discourses, which becomes apparent through word choice, for example: '[ES] is massively important', 'it's good that motor sport is leading the way' (ITV 4 FIA Formula E Live 2014). Important to note is that the level of detail in terms of context surrounding this suggested importance of ES is limited and as such corresponds to Boykoff's (2011) first problem, i.e. a missed opportunity to significantly advance the climate story.

In addition, and despite this rather positive framing of Formula E in terms of a 'strong ecological message', this frame appears only in the pre-race section of the 2014 ITV 4 broadcast, effectively drawing emphasis away from ES throughout all other macro-sections of all three broadcasts (Entman 1993; Misener 2013). Further bearing in mind framing is as much about what is being shown as what is not (Hall, Jessica, and Nixon 2013), in this instance, the 'strong ecological message' frame functions as a neglected frame. The reason for this can be attributed to both external and internal factors. Regarding the former, and despite a rise in general public awareness, ES still does not constitute a highly salient issue to the average British citizen (Taylor et al. 2014; O'Garra et al. 2005). Similarly, where media attention to ES is largely event driven, for which Formula E could apply, it also remains highly novelty driven (Lester 2010; Hansen 2010; Cox 2012). This would suggest that after an initial reference, the novelty and newsworthiness level of ES in Formula E through the 'strong ecological message' frame decreases sharply. More regarding internal factors and in addition to the frame itself, commentator discourse just prior to the beginning of the race section (i.e. after the studio part) provides an alternative insight, even though it does not consist of enough data to provide a true counter-frame:

[Race commentator]: the great thing about this is that the people that brought this together are motor sport people. [...] It's really people with a love of motor sport that have put this together rather than necessarily from the environmental side. (ITV 4 FIA Formula E Live 2014)

[Co-commentator]: Absolutely. Jean Todt [President of the FIA] has given a lot of backing from day one and there's not many people with a motor sport history as his from being a co-driver to being Ferrari F1 team boss. (ITV 4 FIA Formula E Live 2014)

These comments do not reject ES but do imply that 'people from the environmental side' may not succeed where 'motor sport people', i.e. industry professionals that understand the requirements inherent to quality motor sport (entertainment), would in establishing Formula E as an authentic motor racing product. Here, Boykoff's (2011) second problem applies as the framing of ES occurs in terms of socio-political and potential economic concerns regarding ES in Formula E, i.e. remaining firm within the boundaries of neo-liberalism and free-market capitalism (Carvalho 2005). More so, broadcasters reporting on Formula E's embracing of ES may lead viewers to fear that Formula E's entertainment value as authentic motor sport will be affected by it (Crabbe and Brown 2004). Subsequently, the 'strong ecological message' frame's exclusive appearance in the pre-race section of the 2014 ITV 4 broadcast suggests the use of ES use as a green selling card with the main intention to be attractive and interesting (McComas and Shanahan 1999) for previously uninitiated motor sport audiences. Indeed, this focus on maintaining traditional values associated with motor sport by audiences becomes apparent when looking at some of the remaining and more

dominant frames that broadcasters use to help raise the sport's profile (Helland 2007; Kidd 2013).

A first frame in that respect is that of Formula E as a 'challenge' which represents the issue of significant difficulty associated with conceptualizing and competing in Formula E and was complemented by criticism from within the motor sport industry itself: 'They had a lot of hurdles to overcome. A lot of scepticism of motor sport fans [...]' (ITV 4 FIA Formula E Live 2014). This second frame was complemented by its sub-frame 'facing the unknown' which functioned as a dominant frame in the 2015 ITV 4 and the 2016 Channel 5 broadcasts, but as a secondary frame in the 2014 ITV 4 broadcast. This issue of the unknown implies a level of uncertainty, i.e. not knowing what to expect due to Formula E's untried and untested character, on behalf of the organizers and participants. Interestingly, these frames were complemented by a third, i.e. 'proper motor sport', frame which functions as a secondary frame throughout all three broadcasts and suggests that Formula E constitutes solid (motor) sport/entertainment values and credentials and, subsequently, validates audiences' time. This frame also functions as a counter-frame to the 'novelty' frame which will be discussed later. A fourth frame, i.e. 'generating conflict' functions as a secondary frame and encompasses a very common frame in sports reporting, i.e. conflict. As such, it depicts Formula E as a symbolic arena where drama unfolds (Kennedy and Hills 2015). This frame is closely related to its sub-frame 'generating safety' as the latter often arises as a result of the former. As such, this secondary frame only appeared when incidents unfolded during on-track activity whereby the issue is that motor sport is inherently dangerous: 'We always hear motor sport is dangerous, it's at every ticket' (ITV 4 FIA Formula E Live 2014). All five frames described above can be grouped together as a sub-division on the basis of (1) constructing a motor sport series with recognizable elements which stays faithful to values associated with attracting motor sport (broadcasting) audiences (Roy et al. 2010) and (2) the overarching performance frame (Lewis and Weaver 2015). In doing so, this new TV sport effectively frames its own representation in the context of values that generate 'good television' by providing the pleasure points on offer as well as points of identification for audiences (Whannel 1992, 112). Indeed with respect to the latter, and as Crabbe and Brown (2004) indicate, it is very important for broadcasters and organizers to provide a nostalgic experience for motor sport fans. More so, ES is considered by the UK public to not constitute key determinants in the daily decision-making process even though EV's are generally being seen as green and environmentally legitimate (Parkhill et al. 2013; O'Garra et al. 2005). As such, this group falls under the denominator 'traditional motorsport'.

Interestingly, the two remaining frames cannot be categorized under the aforementioned group. The first is the 'novelty' frame which depicts Formula E as a new and different way of going about motor sport and is, as such, constructed around stimulating change in technology, and subsequently relevance, through sport. The presence of this frame is perhaps unsurprising as it has been used often in sport broadcasting to introduce British audiences to unfamiliar sports and has led to broadcasters being able to generate sustainable audience numbers (Whannel 1992). In particular, Formula E is presented as 'a framework for R&D around the electric vehicle' (ITV 4 FIA Formula E Live 2014) which 'takes technology to the edge' (Channel 5 FIA Formula E Live 2016) and results in development of 'the race car of today [which] is the street car of tomorrow' (Channel 5 FIA Formula E Live 2016). This frame is especially prevalent from the second season onwards (see Table 1), when Formula E first introduced 'new powertrains in the back of the cars' (ITV 4 FIA Formula E Live 2015).

In a number of instances, the notion of driving (hybrid) technologies is linked to driving, i.e. promoting sustainability: 'Looking at hybrid technologies and [environmental] sustainability for the future' (ITV 4 FIA Formula E Live 2014).

Last, the 'audience involvement' frame is constructed around the idea that whilst TV audiences have long lacked the means to engage with top-level motor sport 'you can [now] help' (ITV 4 FIA Formula E Live 2014) and functions first and foremost as a counter-frame to the 'challenge' as well as a sub-frame to the 'novelty' frame. The fact that both 'novelty' and 'audience involvement' appear in all three broadcasts, and predominantly during the pre-race broadcasts (see Table 1), suggests that broadcasters believe Formula E can be brought to audiences additionally by introducing something non-traditional like novelty EV technology and enhanced audience engagement and interaction through social media. This is in accordance with the strategy to generate a global audience (Menzies and Nguyen 2012) for Formula E and to draw in fans from other motor sport series and people previously uninterested in motor sport (Chauhan 2015).

The way forward

Clearly, there are some significant external and internal factors that put up barriers for media broadcasters to include the ES frame diachronically in Formula E broadcasting. However, as the long-term health of the sports-media culture has always depended on its ability to engage and tailor to different and emerging communities (Boyle 2010), the question regarding what it would take for such an ES perspective to be 'naturalized' into broad-casts of Formula E emerges? Although the aim of television broadcasting representation is largely to articulate 'various elements into a coherent, yet complex, unity' (Whannel 1992, 115) the 'complex political and social problems are usually unresponsive to simplistic solutions' (Sugden 2006, 238). Bearing this in mind and although perhaps speculative in nature, some final considerations could prove useful. A first consideration entails the integration of a (short) dedicated section as part of each broadcast that covers both recent and relevant sustainability content, i.e. not only ES but also economic and social sustainability, of Formula E in relation to each venue visited. This content would then be gradually integrated in the (motor sport) broadcast structure and disseminated to audiences. Not only would such a dedicated section not compromise traditional motor sport fans' expectations in terms of the race coverage itself, it would also accommodate new audiences that would appreciate this initial, yet consistent, alignment of motor sport and sustainability. This could have considerable potential considering Formula E aims to attract younger audiences that are growing up amidst the societal importance of sustainability as well as digital technologies (Chauhan 2015). Further, such a dedicated section could incorporate audience involvement/input through online and social media with content (e.g. questions, advice, debates) to which drivers and staff can also contribute.

Of course, it would be narrow-minded to consider any successful effort to ‘naturalise’ ES, or sustainability in general, in TV broadcasts of Formula E to be achieved only by broadcasters themselves. Formula E could develop beyond #FanBoost to include a platform that encourages and invites audiences to engage with sustainability related efforts, technologies and other content. Also, from a rules and regulations perspective, additional sustainability challenges could be incorporated for teams and drivers, e.g. the driver that finishes the race with the most energy is rewarded. As such, these final considerations would find further validation in the fact that ‘the sports media relationship has always been characterized by change, ‘shot through with strong patterns of continuity’ (Boyle 2010, 1311).

Conclusion

The primary aim of this study was to build on and contribute to the body of existing research on the representation of ES in motor sport by looking at how different broadcasts deal with Formula E diachronically. Drawing on a framing approach as developed by Gamson and Modigliani (1989) and Entman (1993), we performed a qualitative analysis to obtain a better understanding of the function and importance of ES in live television broadcasts of Formula E.

We found that the frames used to represent Formula E revealed a predominantly traditional focus in favour of maintaining at least some beliefs and values associated with motor sport. Broadcasters picked up on ES exclusively during the earlier stages of the first live broadcast with the premise of Formula E sending a strong ecological message. Afterwards, this focus faded due to a range of external and internal factors suggesting that ES worked as an initial novelty/selling card. More so and much like ES does not constitute a highly salient concept to the average British citizen, coverage of ES in Formula E constitutes a limited level of newsworthiness and is not considered as valuable to as other, non-traditional (i.e. novelty elements) to reach the strategic objective of generating an audience for the new motor sport series. Although broadcasters help raise the sport’s profile from a sporting character, it seems that a more societally aware sports coverage in which ES is monitored longitudinally still remains absent. Thus, it can be said that both external and internal factors mutually reinforce the relationship between sport and contemporary society in that the broadcasting of Formula E does not further a significant exposure of ES and that the wider public considers ES to be of only secondary importance in their own lives.

This article has presented a couple of considerations that might prove valuable for ‘naturalizing’ ES in broadcasting of Formula E. While Formula E’s aim to achieve long-term and global public awareness and recognition as an ES motor sport series continues, future studies will need to follow up on when, how and to what extent broadcasters will eventually carry through this ‘naturalisation of ES’. This study suggests some key emerging issues in what will continue to be a growing area of interest and research as motor sport studies and ES become increasingly relevant in a world aiming at improving sustainability in sports and beyond. For now though, at least as far as the commentator is concerned, ‘going green’ in Formula E broadcasting still only denotes the colour of the lights.

Acknowledgements

First, the author of this article wishes to thank Prof. Dr. Raymond Boyle from the University of Glasgow for his long-lasting assistance and support during the writing process of this paper and the research period which preceded it. Second, the author wishes to extend his thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their intelligent and helpful feedback which has led to the final version of this article.

Notes on contributors

An outline and initial test case for the study underlying this article was presented in 2017 at an International Conference. Subsequent feedback from peers was incorporated in the writing of this article.

Notes

1. A broadcast can be considered to be a system of signs made up of qualifying- and/or race/studio commentary and pre-recorded verbal material such as interviews (Smith 2015).
2. ITV 4 is part of the ITV broadcasting company which is the main free-to-air company in the UK.
3. Channel 5 is a British commercial broadcaster which took over from ITV 4 after it dropped broadcasting Formula E for the third Formula E season (2016–2017).

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