



Football, sports rights, marketing and journalism

Interview with Bjørn Taalesen, Sports Editor TV 2, Norway

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In 2005 the Norwegian Football Association (NFF) sold its media rights for domestic football to TV 2 and the Norwegian Canal Digital for 1 billion NOK (€127 million) for the period 2006-09. The annual value of this deal was increased by 300-400% over previous agreements, and in a country of 4.4 million inhabitants, the cost of these media rights is therefore breathtaking.

This acquisition of football rights is part of a media battle for future dominance within the TV and internet markets; in particular within the new digital terrestrial broadcasting net (from 2009) and for digital satellite platforms.

Sports Editor Bjørn Taalesen is responsible for TV 2 sports media rights and is the Editor of TV 2 sports news formats, including TV 2 Sporten [TV 2 Sport]. This double role means that opportunities knock. Taalesen is in a position to promote his own media sports rights in journalistic formats and thereby make a strong promotional instrument out of journalism. How does TV 2 promote its sports rights? And how does it deal with promotional interests on the one hand and publicist ideals on the other? These are core issues in the relationship between marketing and journalism.

KH: It has been claimed by TV 2, the NFF and the football clubs themselves that TV 2 is “the best sponsor of football”. What does this mean from a marketing perspective?

BT: We are the largest sponsor of Norwegian football in terms of revenue for the Norwegian Football Association. This means that we are in a position to determine the degree to which general sponsors receive on-air publicity. Commercial sports sponsors will often measure their contract according to on-air exposure, and thereby are able to document the value



of their sponsorship. It goes without saying that a TV company that occupies the position of largest sponsor retains a rather unique opportunity to substantiate the value of its contract. The more Norwegian football there is on TV, the bigger the commercial value. That's not bad from a marketing perspective!

I believe the effect of such an extensive television deal requires a professionalisation of the clubs. TV 2 has made specific demands of the clubs and their players with regard to what we expect in terms of involvement and appearance. An inherent supposition is that football makes itself available – in other words that it makes itself available for TV 2. This entails, for instance, that we demand that they are available for interviews in connection with televised games.

KH: How is the football deal working out?

BT: Even though we are still in the early stages, I can honestly say that our experience so far has been exciting and very positive. This entire contract has elevated TV 2 as an organisation and has accelerated a great deal of internal developments. The way in which we have taken on the challenges of web-TV, mobile phone technology and the integration of different platforms, and made all these features function together as a whole, has been surprising. Without this football contract it would have taken TV 2 a lot longer to get to where we are today. On top of this we have established a new [sports and entertainment] TV channel – TV 2 Zebra – in the market at record speed. Thanks to football, our developments have been sensational to a degree that is really unheard of in the television world. On many of these platforms – not least TV 2 Zebra – football and the contract itself have become the primary selling point. Without it, TV 2 would not have had the necessary marketing tools for carrying out these developments.

KH: How important are 'football profiles' for the coverage, and how are these promoted? Has TV 2 advised players and managers on how to deal with the TV medium?

BT: Building profiles is an important feature, as it is in all aspects of the TV sports business. We advise clubs, club administrators and players and try to make them understand our needs – and consequently how our needs also help serve their interests. It seems now that more and more clubs understand that a television contract is only valuable if both the TV channel and the clubs themselves feel it's beneficial to them. Everyone knows that this is a consequential aspect, not least when the contract is to be renegotiated in three to four years. TV 2 has held many seminars and meetings with the clubs; it collaborates extensively with Norwegian Top Football (NTF) – both prior to and during the season – and also performs regular evaluations with the organisation. A mutually beneficial television deal increases the chances of closing an equally beneficial deal in the future.

KH: How important is journalism as a promotional tool? To what extent is your sports journalism 'formatted' as promotion, for example to promote future matches?

BT: There is a connection between television rights and the editorial agenda – just as there is a connection between the television agenda and the newspaper agenda. When you own rights you also have access – this is something that influences your journalistic choices. You'll find the best commercial results for pay-TV channels where these are linked to mother-stations that can add promotional value. This is the case in Norway as it is everywhere else.

The question is how to present your material. You may go by traditional news values, which I think is a set of criteria everyone can understand. However, it shouldn't be difficult to understand why we choose to devote more time and attention to coverage where we own the broadcasting rights. When we had the rights to broadcast the English Premier League, we spent a lot of time in England. A Norwegian footballer couldn't so much as sneeze without us doing a story. That threshold is different now. It changes constantly. In my opinion this is something that applies not just to us,



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because I see the same elsewhere. However, I'm not sure to what extent others are willing to admit to this. In my opinion we might as well admit it. As a result, the football agreement entails a further shift in focus. Some may ask if this is even possible: "More football?!" The news value bar is probably lower than ever when it comes to football. But we have invested in turning ourselves into the football channel – so that's what we'll be.

KH: How do you combine media rights with journalism in creating a strong commercial football product? What are the consequences of this for your sports news values?

BT: It would be commercial suicide not to use your own TV channel to promote your own sports rights. In the end it all boils down to your own credibility as a reporter and editor – as it does in all journalism. If you mess this up you have lost anyway. There are many traps to fall into here but at the end of the day you are measured on credibility. Journalism will always be about priorities – choosing between the many different events you are presented with every day. Therefore, yes, conflicts might arise between journalistic ideals and commercial interests. But what are these ideals? The everyday job is to serve the news agenda. The news agenda is not always unambiguous, but rather created by the media itself. This does not only apply to

sports journalism. Today, serious newspapers administer dieting clubs via the internet – with readers as members – occasionally presenting this as important journalistic issues in the print version. Could it be that marketing interests also have some influence in other areas besides sport?

For my own part, I feel OK about not being part of the daily news wheel – the sports wheel is driven by its own journalistic hub. Yet owning sports rights means you automatically raise considerable attention for topics relevant to these rights. You become so commercial in your thinking that you inevitably create most of your contacts within this environment; you spend most of your time there and you devote most of your energy in that direction. Journalism will always be affected by who you are and where you are.

KH: From this perspective, what is the importance of convergence between different technological platforms?

BT: Many of the different platforms that surround us today are interconnected. Users don't differentiate between them, and because of the new immediacy this environment offers, the media can only try to deliver accordingly. Convergence has become a standard phrase, but it is now more valid than ever. For many media houses, this phrase is the key to survival in tomorrow's media world.

KH: What challenges does self-promotion raise in public relations terms?

BT: We can easily be accused of having experimented in different directions when it comes to managing these rights. It is easy to see some of the more tabloid angles we have used in this respect. What really matters is that our customers feel we are serving their needs rather than exactly how we are presenting the material. The tender document for the Norwegian football transaction contained a number of demands that clearly touched on the editorial aspects of the football coverage. We could see that football agent



Rune Hauge¹ not only had ambitions for making a large profit for himself, but also for acting as editor. Many of these demands were dispersed during negotiations and ended up having no practical implications. But perhaps it should be questioned why these demands were even made in the first place.

Most of the discussion had to do with the extent of the television productions themselves. This was new to many in Norway, but wasn't really as exceptional as was argued by Norwegian newspapers. Demands regarding the number of cameras used in a TV broadcast have just as much to do with the value of the product itself. The higher the production value, the better the product. Therefore, negotiations regarding such demands are also discussions on what kind of value you place on a product.

KH: Will we see closer co-operation between TV 2 and the individual clubs to develop 'club TV channels'?

BT: We have seen examples of this emerging. This could be the result of further advancing our common interests, and could benefit us both.

KH: There are several examples of 'less attractive' sports that might enhance coverage by generating a sponsored media product and thereby attracting more media exposure. How does this work?

BT: I like to call it the wheel of commercialism, where many parties come together in making it turn. Without TV there would be less interest from sponsors – without sponsor money there would be little progress – and without progress, less general interest. We must all adjust to this new reality and the same applies to sport, even if that means some of the old traditions that are so cherished by many are discarded.

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KH: To what extent – and how – do the more powerful actors try to influence TV 2 transmissions and journalistic coverage of sport?


BT: There have been examples of this. For instance, we've seen it happen in a sport where we no longer own the rights. Formula One is a classic example. We haven't been much engaged in this field – journalistically, but what little we have done has to a large extent been limited by control exerted by the sport itself. For instance, we were not allowed to shoot our own pictures even though we owned the rights. Furthermore, UEFA, FIFA and the IOC have tried to add promotional material to TV rights and present it as editorial choice. In my opinion, this is a way of thinking that will soon be history. Now we see the modern sports administrators focusing rather on the more professional aspects of sports coverage. Moreover, they have realised that adding knowledge of the media to their own organisations will render more and better results.

Today there is a clear tendency within Norwegian football to invest in media knowledge. Just in the short period since signing the football contract the clubs' own organisation has expanded from one to six

¹ Rune Hauge has been hired twice by the Norwegian Football Association to conduct the negotiations related to the Norwegian football deal. He has also had the role in Sweden twice. It was thanks to his skills that the Norwegian Football Association got the breathtaking sum of 1 billion NOK (€127 million) for the rights. Rune Hauge's commission of this deal was 10%.



permanent employees – and they will be adding even more manpower to this area. All for the purpose of reinforcing the clubs' professionalism, not least in regards to the media. Three of these staff members have extensive experience from working in the Norwegian press.

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Bibliographies

Bjørn Taalesen has been the TV 2 Sports Editor since 1995. His background is in sports reporting, and he has worked for several Norwegian newspapers, including the national number two tabloid, *Dagbladet*. This year he published a 'behind-the-scenes' book about the process behind the 2005 Norwegian football contract: *Milliardspillet* [The Billion-Kroner Game].

Knut Helland is a Professor in the Department of Information Science and Media Studies at the University of Bergen. His two main areas of research are relations between sport and the media, and news production and journalism. During the 2000 European Championship for men (Euro 2000) he followed the Norwegian national team, studying source relations between the media and the national team during the event. The study was published in the book *Sport, medier og journalistikk* [Sport, media and journalism].

TV 2 owns nearly all the rights to Norwegian football – all league and cup football for men and women as well as international games played in Norway. TV 2 also owns the rights to the FIFA World Cup in 2010 and 2014. Additionally, TV 2 has acquired the rights to Norwegian handball and all international handball championships up to and including 2010. Through the European Broadcasting Union, TV 2 also owns the rights to the Tour de France until 2008. TV 2 Sporten has an annual budget of close to 500 million NOK (€40 million).