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# TAKE FIVE: HOW SPORTS ILLUSTRATED AND L'ÉQUIPE REDEFINE THE LONG FORM SPORTS JOURNALISM GENRE

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*The consolidation of the countergenre that is long form sports journalism (LFSJ) is of growing interest to the sports media researcher. In order to trace its expansion across the sports journalism landscape, this article offers a comparative transatlantic case study featuring the entire collection of long-form stories developed by two prestigious publications: the American magazine* Sports Illustrated *(*SI Longform*) and the French sports daily* L'Équipe *(*L'Équipe Explore*). The study considers the slow journalism heritage of LFSJ and its challenge to established web interface theology while exploring key issues such as the sports agenda, sourcing and the use of immersive multimedia formats, aimed at improving the sporting culture of its users. The article concludes by considering the pivotal role of LFSJ in the brand-building strategies of the media outlets themselves.*

**Keywords:** agenda, brand-building, long form, multimedia, sourcing, sports journalism.

## Introduction

While it is true that lengthy sports feature articles have been a regular in mainstream press outlets for decades, the vigorous expansion across the journalism landscape of long form sports journalism in its online multimedia capacity is a more recent phenomenon. In a media environment characterized by 24/7 production cycles, high speed information flow and the impact of social media, the consolidation of this countergenre –LFSJ from now on– is of growing interest to the sports communication researcher. Legacy outlets such as *The New York Times* or *The Guardian* along with prominent specialized platforms such as *Sports Illustrated Longform*, *L'Équipe Explore*, *SBNation*, *NBC SportsWorld*, *ESPN.com* or *Grantland* have all invested human resources not only in multimedia formats which embrace innovation but also by lending priority to storytelling techniques which greater engage the reader thanks to the interface which LFSJ architecture offers.

### *The LFSJ heritage: new-new journalism, slow journalism*

Long-form digital sports writing has paid its dues to recent wider dynamics in journalism praxis. A first nod can be made to the "new-new journalism" movement dating back a decade or so when a generation of disgruntled journalists took it on themselves to counter the anti-professional practices epitomised by the terms *binge journalism* or "churnalism" (Davies 2008) and imported from the original "new

journalism" of the Sixties elements of narrative and ethical regeneration. These instruments include in-depth investigations for which the term "immersion journalism" is often coined together with a "greater attention to the subjective dimension of the experience and feelings of the actors of the events" (Neveu 2014) and an unapologetically-literary reporting style which features the presence of the authors voice in the narrative (Sims, 2007).

LFSJ is also compatible with one of the most fashionable underswells in journalism production processes known as *slow journalism*. The slow journalism movement, which has been championed in recent years by publications such as *Delayed Gratification*, *Jot Down*, *Narratively*, *De Correspondent* or *The New York Times Magazine* (Dowling 2016; Harbers 2016), proposes a "new way of thinking about and producing journalism" (Le Masurier 2016, 405). Its identifying traits include:

- the possibility of a "proper time" (Ball 2016): the need to disassociate journalism from the current hyper-accelerated and algorithmic news rhythm (Ananny 2016; Le Masurier 2016), that is, the breaking news paradigm based on speed and instantaneity. According to Dowling and Vogan (2015, 218), "timeliness is moot. The digital long-form genre is untethered to the breaking news cycle"
- an interest in high standard of writing and publication, accuracy, reflection, narrative, context, deep research, source checking and a rejection of interpretative clichés (Le Masurier 2015)
- a move away from pre-packaged PR material and the overuse of wire services with the aim of amplifying "otherwise un-heard voices" (Belt and South 2016, 551)
- the preservation of prestige through an obsession with quality, the power of narrative and the setting of "the highest standards of storytelling craft" (Greenberg 2012, 382)
- the transparency and self-reflexivity of journalists. As Harbers (2016, 499) explains, "slow journalism is geared towards forms of reporting that do not conceal the underlying aspects of the reporting process". This "keeps the reader informed about the provenance of the information and how it was gathered" (Greenberg 2012, 381-382)
- the opportunity of engaging in acts of co-production between different journalists and news organizations (Boyles 2016)
- the aim of re-training "news audiences into investing in the benefits of patience and anticipation over instant gratification" (Dowling 2016, 535)
- the reader/user as participant-collaborator. While Vogan and Downling (2016, 22) talk of how long-form journalism leads to the "empowerment of the fan", Nguyen (2012) considers it to have "broken the templates to build customized reading experiences". According to Meuret (2013), "it is no longer the journalists who find themselves embedded alone, but rather the readers, who, with a single click, can take over the controls of a story in which they assume the role of both observer and participant (…) Readers, thrown into the experience of others, seeing the world through the eyes of the journalist, find themselves taking part".

The combination of classic feature reporting skills with digital interface possibilities has led many observers to consider long form journalism as representing the interaction between "old" and "new" media typical of "convergent media culture", a phenomenon which "alters the relationships between existing technologies, industries, markets and genres" (Jenkins 2006, 15). In this sense, the blurring of technological distinctions that separate print and digital media has been referred to as "liquid journalism" (Deuze 2008). The hybrid character of the *Sports Illustrated* and *L'Équipe* long form projects exemplifies this "bridging" role.

### *Challenging web theology*

Interviewed in 2013 about the impact of long form journalism, David Remnick, editor of *The New Yorker*, declared: "I think it's fantastic that the first law of evangelical Web theology, that no one would read anything long on the Web, has been overturned thoroughly" (Sharp 2013). One of the main reasons as to why this premise was overturned and which accounts for the positive reception of long form sports journalism has been the successful integration of multimedia applications into linear storytelling, a process which has led to an enhancement of the news consumption experience (Barnhurst 2010; Pauly 2014; Ramon and Tulloch 2016).

As Jacobson et al. (2016, 530) point out, "today's long-form journalism emerges at a dynamic time of technological advancement in the news industry, of conceptual understandings of visual studies and of journalism as a ritualized form of storytelling". Advances such as parallax scrolling, embedded video footage, high-resolution graphics work, audio documents and interactive photography embed the user into the warp and weft of the narrative thus lending the Web greater potential for offering a seamless multi-sensorial experience. According to analysts, the key to the success of long form has been its capacity for "uniting print long-form narrative's novelistic technique with cinematic data visualization" and a move towards a "business model built on a carefully crafted multimedia product sensitive to users' appreciation of multimedia narrative aesthetics" (Dowling and Vogan 2015, 210, 220).

Some previous Internet conventions are subverted along the way. For example, limits are placed on hyperlinks in order to reduce the risk of distraction. The driving idea here is that each feature long form work should function as a "cognitive container" in which "media add-ons work to hold reader attention rather than scatter it to external Web sources" (…) digital long-form departs from online journalism's advertisement-littered and click-heavy customs" (…) and breaks from the distracting and superficial nature of online news" (Dowling and Vogan 2015, 211). According to Steve Duenes, Associate Managing Editor at *The New York Times*, it is essential that the interaction with the technology did not lead the user to "feel like you were taking a detour but (rather) that the multimedia was part of the one narrative flow." (Rue 2013) A key element here is that the capacity to engage the reader –what Rue refers to as the "triggering of an emotional response as you venture through the story"– is of greater importance than the spectacular nature of the design components themselves.

## Methodology

The objective of the research is to consider to what extent do *Sports Illustrated Longform* and *L'Équipe Explore* promote a wider agenda, an alternative narrative and a quality user experience through the multimedia resources available in digital long-form sports journalism. To do so, content analysis has allowed researchers to read, interpret and make valid inferences in a systematic way of the manifest content of the messages included in the two websites, with the objective of contrasting the research questions with the empirical data obtained (Bryman 2012; Wimmer and Dominick 2011).

The sample was chosen in a non-probabilistic way by the researchers, who purposely selected two websites specifically devoted to long-form sports journalism. *Sports Illustrated Longform* (United States of America) and *L'Équipe Explore* (France) were selected considering strategic criteria such as the relevance, tradition and respectability of their parent companies; the quality of their web-based sports

journalism; the volume of publication; and their innovation in terms of multimedia and interactive resources. In a high-speed media landscape these platforms represent an alternative space to articulate a different kind of journalism, based on in-depth research, long-form narratives and tailor-made consumption of content by the user.

The New York-based *Sports Illustrated*, property of Time Inc., was founded in 1954. Its high circulation figures can be traced to its in-depth sports reporting and richness in photography, aspects that still impregnate its journalistic approach. At time of writing, it has a print circulation of 3,004,430 and an audience of 27 million unique users on its website. In October 2013, the magazine launched its long-form platform (http://www.si.com/longform/). This website is presented under the cachet "Longform since 1954", an expression that reinforces the brand identity of the company by suggesting that "the magazine had been producing such relatively complex works for decades" (Downling and Vogan 2015, 217). Since its creation, *SI Longform* has published 58 articles (*n*=58), averaging 1.81 articles per month.

The French sports daily *L'Équipe* was created in 1947 as a successor to the newspaper *L'Auto*, initially founded in 1900 as *L'Auto-Vélo*. The outlet, owned by Éditions Philippe Amaury, "has acquired the reputation of being a quality newspaper providing an excellent coverage of sports news, with which no 'generalist' newspaper can compete" (Ranc 2012, 40). L'*Équipe* has a circulation rate of 217,456 copies at time of writing and its website has an audience of 5.6 million unique users. *L'Équipe Explore* (http://www.lequipe.fr/explore/), the specific website devoted to long articles and interactivity, was launched in April 2013. Since then, 39 articles have been published, for an average periodicity of 1.03 pieces per month.

The object of study has been the entire collection of long-form stories published by *Sports Illustrated Longform* and *L'Équipe Explore* (*n*=97) up until May 2016. In order to conduct the empirical analysis, two methodological tools were designed: a codebook and a coding form. The codebook specified with detail the instructions and criteria used to identify and evaluate each category, so that researchers could register the information following a uniform approach. This coding scheme enabled the further comparison between the data obtained in the two outlets. A coding sheet was created to allow the relevant aspects of each article to be registered. Additional observations about the production and the display of contents were also coded. Taking into account the requirement to test the form to assure the inter-coder reliability, 10 pieces (5 from *Sports Illustrated Longform* and 5 from *L'Équipe Explore*) were codified by the two researchers before starting the systematic analysis of the whole sample.

After coding the 97 articles that compose the sample, researchers exported the data to a common file from which they proceeded to extract the quantitative and qualitative data, generating the tables, examples and observations presented here. Finally, following Brennen's (2013, 24) indications, the researchers proceeded to analyse the information and interpret the results, extracting the relevant conclusions drawn from the empirical study.

## Results

### *Agenda and sourcing*

A comparative glance at Table 1 shows that the French website promotes a more diverse sporting agenda given that *SI Longform* has given space over to 14 different sports in the 58 feature articles that it has published so far while *L'Équipe Explore* has published 39 articles devoted to 23 disciplines. The statistics also reveal a broad

definition of 'sports' as both media outlets feature articles on traditionally lesser-covered disciplines such as base jumping, bass fishing, dancing, e-sports, rodeo or trailing. However when it comes to priority sport selection, each of the outlets has focused prominently on three sports to build their agendas. In the case of *Sports Illustrated Longform*, 59.91% of the pieces concern basketball (24.57%), football (22.84%) and baseball (12.50%), while at *L'Équipe Explore* 41.03% of the sample has been devoted to soccer (17.95%), cycling (12.82%) and rugby (10.26%).

[Table 1]

While a surface observation shows that by focussing on a "big three" format, the two outlets seem to reproduce and reinforce the preponderance of revenue sports, a deeper look at the sample reveals that the two websites have provided original angles and unique perspectives on well known sports figures alongside the profiles of unfamiliar or even forgotten protagonists.

*Promoting original angles and unique perspectives on dominant sports*

In the case of basketball we can see how these two outlets revisit history and use the human interest angles to focus not only on the live of Kobe Bryant or Lebron James' return to Cleveland but also on alternative stories such as the Patrick Ewing conspiracy in the 1985 NBA draft or the unsolved mystery of the death of Bison Dele. College basketball receives similar treatment from *SI Longform* as seen by its reporting on Princeton's near upset of Georgetown in the first round of the 1989 NCAA Basketball or coach Bob Knight's chair throwing incident. In addition, *Sports Illustrated* has even converted its reporters in protagonists of basketball stories, as happened with Michael McKnight's 363-day quest to learning how to dunk or Alexander Wolff's adventure of owning an American Basketball Association (ABA) team, the Vermont Frost Heaves.

As for its angle on American football, *SI Longform* exploits its archives when recounting the stories of quarterback Dan Marino, who only made one Super Bowl career appearance, the key value of the halftime segment of the Super Bowl or the Bears' memorable Super Bowl shuffle, which became a cultural landmark in 1985. College football is also seen through a historical frame. A salient example here is the then-versus-now historical photograph sequence taken at the 1957 Cotton Bowl between TCU and Syracuse. A relevant human interest collegiate story is the "Ghost of Speedy Cannon" about an African-American football player at Jacksonville High School (Alabama), who died in a football match in 1972 but whose death can be connected to racism as journalist Thomas Lake argues after a 12-month investigative task to shed new light on the case.

Human-driven stories and historical elements are also translated into baseball, as evidenced by long articles on the rebuilding of the Houston Astros, the retirement of Derek Jeter as an opportunity to reflect on the changes in the MLB or the suicide of pitcher Donnie Moore in 1989.

As for its "Big Three", *L'Équipe Explore* delves into the archives to reveal unknown aspects of the 1970 Brazilian World Cup soccer team or the state of football in the former Yugoslavia, assessing how the transformation of the country in six republics impacted sport in general. *L'Équipe Explore*'s coverage of cycling is also impregnated with a historical spirit as shown by articles on the most remarkable climbers in the Tour de France's history or the tragic death of Tom Simpson on Mont Ventoux. As for more intimate human interest stories the French platform reveals the psychology of cycling's

final sprint or the African origins of Chris Froome. As regards rugby, the outlet recalled the 1999 Rugby World Cup and the victory of France over New Zealand and discovered for its readers the day-to-day life of the amateur club US Finhan.

*Gender and nationality issues*

Mediasport has traditionally been constructed as a predominantly masculine territory, where gender inequalities have not only been legitimized but also accentuated (Bruce 2013). Quantitatively, the space devoted to male sporting achievements has been a lot more extensive than that of women (Messner and Cooky 2010; O'Neil and Mulready 2015). Although the figures vary depending on the social, historical and sporting contexts of each country, women still receive less than 10% of the sporting coverage both in newspapers and television (Markula 2009).

Unfortunately, *SI Longform* and *L'Équipe Explore* have not provided more opportunities for sportswomen to be showcased. At *SI Longform*, 77.59% (*n*=45) of the pieces have been devoted to men. Only two stories (3.45%) have sportswomen as protagonists and 9 stories (15.52%) have both genders as protagonists. The gender gap is even wider at *L'Équipe Explore*, where men have accounted for 87.18% (*n*=34) of the stories and only one piece has been exclusively devoted to women. Therefore, it can observed that from the 97 pieces that integrate the sample, only three articles, starred by the US skier Mikaela Shiffrin, the US tennis player Serena Williams and the ballet dancer Mathilde Froustey have been devoted to sportswomen.

[Table 2]

It should be noted that *SI Longform* and *L'Équipe Explore* are not an exception when it comes to the structural underrepresentation of women in media organizations (Whiteside and Hardin 2013). There are no female reporters among the authors of *SI Longform*'s articles. Among the authors at *L'Équipe Explore*, only two female journalists authored a piece.

In terms of nationality, media have commonly been prone to maximize their countries' stories over the rest. Due to the financial logic of media and the news criteria of cultural proximity (Angelini et al. 2012), media organizations have primarily tailored their agenda "towards nationally constituted and regional/local readerships" (Rowe 2013, 166). Within this trend, the investigation reveals the high level of ethnocentrism displayed by *Sports Illustrated Longform*. American athletes have been protagonists in 84.48% of the articles (*n*=49) while international athletes have only accounted for the remaining 15.52% of the pieces (*n*=9). In stark contrast, *L'Équipe Explore* showed a greater international approach in its agenda. From the 39 articles published, 13 have been devoted to French athletes (33.33%) while 26 pieces (66.67%) have had international athletes as protagonists.

[Table 3]

*Contextual issues*

According to Boyle (2006, 143), "at its best, sports journalism is about making sense of the wider context within which events have occurred". That is, the role of the journalist should be "to place athletic performances within broader contexts in order to enhance the overall understanding of sport" (Billings 2008, 56). Our research shows

that *SI Longform* and *L'Équipe Explore* have made sense of the larger framework of sport, expanding their coverage to embrace the complexity and salient issues of a social, historical, geopolitical, and cultural nature.

First and foremost, race issues have been rendered as one of the prominent contextual areas in the coverage, especially at *SI Longform*. At "Ghost of Speedy Cannon", Thomas Lake delved into the climate of racism and hatred against African-Americans in Alabama in the early 1970s. In "Faster than the Fastest", McKnight recalls the types of expressions that journalists employed in the 1930s to refer to African-American athletes while Gregory and Wolff's "The Game That Saved March Madness" shed light on the connection between the Georgetown Hoyas black players and the rise of the 'gangsta rap' culture, which made many people associate basketball players with "thugs".

Health issues also receive major attention. "Shane comes to the Metrodome" covers the negative long-term effects of American football over health and in particular how Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE), destroys parts of the brain and generates memory loss, depression and even dementia. Through the article "Jeu de Massacre?", *L'Équipe Explore* raises the public awareness of rugby on health. Other health issues explored involve the role of psychology in football and golf; the risks of apnea over health; doping in cycling, baseball and basketball; the safety measures in dirt track racing; the mental illness of the baseball player Donnie Moore and the brain injury suffered by the horse breeder Jeff Lucas.

Thirdly, geopolitical and historical issues are major components of the contextual approach displayed by the two websites. In "Yougo Football", *L'Équipe Explore* provided contextual information about the Balkan war and its effects on sports. "On the Edge" focuses on the tensions and deteriorating relations between Georgia and Russia and the instability caused by the conflicts over the disputed regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The context of the Cold War and how it made it impossible for Arvydas Sabonis to play college basketball in the United States is also featured along with "L'Appel de l'Irlande", which explains the division of Ireland and how the Irish rugby team and the common anthem play a key role in building bridges of respect and tolerance between the two countries. "Kasparov contre le reste du monde" explains how the chess master took advantage of the historical and geopolitical circumstances of the time, becoming a symbol of the change accompanying the upheavals that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The economic impact of sport is also brought to the fore. At "Masters of Bass", Steve Rushin explains the industry of bass fishing, which now includes 250,000-square-foot Bass Pro Shops and multimillionaire professional bass anglers. *L'Équipe Explore*'s Xavier Colombani contextualized his piece on Lebron James with the economic effect of his comeback to Cleveland on local business while the economics of horse riding, the Superbowl halftime show and the emerging market of soccer statistics are also examined by *Sports Illustrated Longform*.

*Sources*

This study reveals that both sites use such a wide range of relevant sources to build well-documented coverage and provide the most complete picture possible. In contrast to previous studies, which pointed out the scarce number of different sources employed in sports journalism (Rowe 2007), the media studied here use an average of 5.03 and 5.85 sources in each article.

The most widely used sources have been sporting figures (former athletes, athletes, coaches, performance directors, and so on). At *SI Longform*, former athletes are included in 63.79% (*n*=37) of the sample, coaches and performance directors are featured in 58.62% (*n*=34) of the articles and current athletes appear in 44.83% (*n*=26) of the pieces. Likewise, *L'Équipe Explore* has counted on past and present athletes (used as sources in 31 and 29 out of 39 pieces) as well as coaches and performance directors (*n*=28) to provide the needed background and analysis in their stories.

[Table 4]

Sporting actors aside, national and international media are frequently quoted by the two outlets. At *SI Longform*, these sources were included in 60.34% (*n*=35) of the pieces, while at *L'Équipe Explore*, national and international media organizations were reflected in 64.10% (*n*=25) of the articles. The insights provided by veteran journalists and the extensive photographical material provided by major news agencies and other newswire services also allows *SI Longform* and *L'Équipe Explore* to round out their coverage. Sports institutions and organizations are also frequently cited by both websites alike (*n*=24). Executives, representatives and former representatives from clubs and franchises, national teams, governmental institutions, universities and collegiate institutions, Olympic and Paralympic Committees, national and international federations of different sports, professional leagues and competitions and foundations are all present in LFSJ sourcing routines.

Scholars, experts and analysts are also relevant especially at *L'Équipe Explore*, where they have been consulted in 33.33% (*n*=13) of all cases. Outside academia, prominent experts from different fields (law, neurosurgery, psychology or data analysts) have also been consulted. The sources with the least impact are journalists and editors from other news desks, private companies, websites and social networking sites and blogs. Given that human interest is a cornerstone promoted by *SI Longform* and *L'Équipe Explore* family members and friends have often been quoted during the timeframe of the observation in their crucial story-building role along with fans, spectators, referees, scouts and practitioners from different professional sectors (teachers, engineers, businessmen, illustrators, attorneys, film-makers, and so on).

### *Digital convergence*

A detailed examination of both platforms shows that both outlets are geared towards blending text with images, videos and sophisticated multimedia / interactive elements to deliver their products. The formats employed and the digital tools provided allow for a creative license which enhances the quality and appeal of information, as well as enriching the users' reading experience.

#### *Formats*

Each one of the stories published presents a unique look, a distinctive template and a specific content organization. To display the information, *SI Longform* has prioritized the vertical scrolling model, including parallax, an attractive type of curtain effect in which the background moves more slowly than the foreground. *L'Équipe Explore* has mostly employed a hybrid approach, which allows readers to scroll down using parallax transitions or have direct access to the different chapters of the stories.

Stories are structured in five sections and the reader can jump between them thus creating his or her own reading chronology.

*Texts*

While length does not necessarily imply quality, literary sports writing does require a certain breathing space in order to provide comprehensive analysis and interpretation of all the significant issues of both a sporting and contextual nature (Le Masurier 2015). As can be perceived from Table 5, in broad terms *L'Équipe Explore* has provided longer pieces than *SI Longform*. The articles with an extension inferior to 45,000 characters (*n*=44) represent 75.86% of *Sports Illustrated*'s sample, whereas the articles of the same length only account for 46.15% of content published at *L'Équipe Explore*. The French site's articles ranged from 45,000 to 65,000 characters (*n*=24) and represented 61.54% of total production.

[Table 5]

*Use of images*

As for extra-textual features, both sites used more than 31 photos on average in each article. The types of images published, which were coherently integrated in the narrative flow of the stories, include large-format photographs (combination of action shots and portrait shots, both contemporary and archival), screen capture shots of video footage, symbols and icons, diagrams, collages, images of tickets and clips from old newspapers, among others. Poignant examples include the 25 front page covers employed by Neil Leifer in his panoramic over the history of boxing photography or those that allow readers' to focus on one protagonist of the picture, as it happened with the case of Bison Dele. While many of the photographs have been provided by major news agencies, others have been taken specifically for the articles, such as "Astro-Matic Baseball" or "A Place in the Game".

*Use of videos*

While video is an integral component of the long-form storytelling provided by *SI Longform* and *L'Équipe Explore*, research reveals significant differences between the two media platforms. At *SI Longform*, two of every three pieces include video (65.52%) whereas the French site uses video in all 39 of its articles.

[Table 6]

The amount of video material in the articles shows how LFSJ considers this as a useful resource. Of its 38 feature articles, *SI Longform* has published 224 videos for an average of 5.89 per article. By contrast, *L'Équipe Explore* has included 278 videos in 23 pieces, for an average of no less than 12 pieces of video footage per article. *L'Équipe Explore* also posted lengthier clips, mostly beyond ten minutes of length in almost 90% of all articles and published three pieces where video is the primary tool. In those pieces, focused on ultra-trailing, track cycling and pole vaulting, videos of over 20 minutes duration are the main resources of the articles.

[Table 7]

So what is video footage deployed for? Historical footage of sporting action is one of its main uses. An example of the latter is "Ghost of Speedy Cannon", which employed footage recorded on 16-mm that was kept for decades before being digitized by *Sports Illustrated*. Interviews with past and present protagonists are also frequently used. Contemporary television clips also enrich articles while some even include embedded videos of entire matches, such as the 1986 USFL Championship Game between Baltimore and Oakland. Video is also used to showcase the profiles of lesser-known athletes as in "The very best", which includes 40 minutes of video footage on the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics.

Video also offers a space for innovation. Some pieces incorporate audiovisual footage made with Instagram while others, particularly at *L'Équipe Explore*, include animations and infographics. To illustrate, "À Bout de Souffle" includes a video with an animation that explains the details of how diver Herbert Nitsch descended to 253 metres while in "Clock hunters", video animation presents the evolution from Eddy Merckx's time trial bike (1974) to Bradley Wiggins' bike (2012), showing the dramatic changes in aerodynamics.

*Multimedia and interactive elements*

Along with images and video, *L'Équipe Explore* and *SI Longform* use a wide range of other multimedia elements that enhance the aesthetic attractiveness of stories and reveal the high level of creativity and technical evolution that the two organizations have undergone in the recent years. *SI Longform* has embedded photo-galleries in 41.38% of its pieces (*n*=24), followed by audios (*n*=9), timelines/chronologies (*n*=7), graphics and infographics (*n*=4). *L'Équipe Explore* creates graphics and infographics for 79.49% of its pieces (*n*=31) and makes an intensive use of photo-galleries and maps followed by timelines/chronologies (*n*=8), other interactive applications (*n*=7), and audios (*n*=2).

[Table 8]

These applications enhance the quality of information in various ways. Photo-galleries allow readers to visually revisit key moments and protagonists in the history of sport. Timelines permit users to easily navigate through the careers of athletes and the history of competitions. Maps provide valuable contextual information about the location of sporting events. A pertinent example is the article "3-on-3", focused on FIBA's half court basketball World Tour where seven Google interactive maps enable users to explore each of the venues.

Graphics, especially at *L'Équipe Explore*, have been crucial in the strategy of enhancing the richness of content. Visually-attractive infographics prove very useful to explain specific data such as the Freeride World Tour article "Freeride. Oserez vous les suivre?". Other significant examples of data visualization can be found at "Nous Étions si haut, perches", where an infographic shows the records obtained in the pole vault from 1898 to 2014 or at "Tahiti Surf Club", where a two-image graphic explains the formation of the Teahupoo wave. The implementation of interactive infographics has enhanced the possibility of transmitting additional data. To illustrate, at "Chasseurs de Temps", dynamic infographics allow readers to see Lapierre's aerodynamic innovations where users can click on seven different parts of the bike.

As part of its interactive package *SI Longform* includes articles such as "Sending our very best" where in order to learn more about the profiles of 26 Winter Olympians

and Paralympians who took part in the Sochi 2014 Olympics, readers can navigate scrolling horizontally, discovering the profiles of the athletes, which include videos and hyperlinks to their social media accounts. A second interactive feature, "Boston: One Year Later" enables readers to choose between using a more linear pattern or navigating through the course map of the Marathon, which includes different textual and visual materials of the stories of the people involved in the race. Other tools worth of highlighting include embedded audios (when no video footage is available), glossaries for explaining jargon or interactive images enhanced with richer content. An ingenious example of interactive image use can be found at "Mortelle Sant Valentin", which motivates readers to discover clues on Oscar Pistorius' case as if they were detectives.

*Use of hyperlinks*

In contrast to this display of multimedia applications, hyperlinks have been scarcely used, despite being generally regarded as core elements in web journalism. At *SI Longform*, 93.1% of the pieces (*n*=54) do not provide any hyperlink. Following a similar pattern, at *L'Équipe Explore*, 79.49% of the pieces (*n*=31) do not include any link.

[Table 9]

The French outlet has only employed 13 hyperlinks throughout the sample and most of them give access to PDF articles that were originally published at either *L'Équipe* or *L'Équipe Magazine*. In the case of *SI Longform*, 98 hyperlinks were codified. However, it should be noted that one piece alone (on the Sochi 2014 Olympians) includes 52 links to their social media profiles on Twitter and Instagram. The major absence of hyperlinks at both sites indicates that both media pursue self-contained products, capable of retaining readers' attention through their convergent narratives. By doing so, they also constrain the users' opportunities to obtain further information from other relevant online platforms.

## Discussion

Both the qualitative and quantitative content analyses presented in this study allow us to highlight some of the most salient issues in current online long form sports journalism. In order to structure the discussion of the findings, we have divided our analysis into four blocks: story content itself, the LFSJ agenda, the digital convergence issue and the role long form plays in the commercial strategy of media companies.

### *Content*

As for content, the (re) creation of sporting history, the construction of legend and a certain nostalgia are constant features of the works present in the sample. There is a proliferation of cross-generational stories particularly in the case of *SI Longform* such as the 1957 Cotton Bowl story which features the same photo in the same locker room taken five decades later or the "time capsule" used by SI to transport the reader back to 1985 considered as a "Great Year in Sports". Cross-generational pieces include the father and son story of Lithuanian basketball star Sabonis or the Derek Jeter feature on how the game of baseball has changed. This emphasis reinforces the idea that "slow journalism" is as interested in "the old" as it is in "the new" (Le Masurier 2015, 138).

Many stories carry a "journey" leitmotif such as McKnight's slam dunk torture, Kobe Bryant's journey into "twilight", the recovery made by Boston marathon runners or the evolution of US soccer fans. This allows users to gain perspective on sporting events and delves into personal memory association with a shared sports culture. While it is true that positive stories regarding personal endeavour and the strength of the human spirit do prevail, sporting tragedy is also present in the long form sample such as the stories surrounding the deaths of pitcher Donnie Moore, the NBA´s Bison Dele, Alabama football star Speedy Cannon or the Memorial day weekend deaths at the dirt track circuit.

Examples of sporting failure are also present in the sample as can be seen in the features dedicated to one-off quarterback wonders Tim Tebow or Dan Marino or the decline of Russian ice hockey. What unites these evocative stories is the focus on the human dimension, the zoom in on the motivations for personal actions that may lead equally to sporting glory or unexpected failure. In the words of Meuret (2013), "the existential questions they are faced with apply to everybody. The deep humanity and the long narrative development of these stories touch us. They reveal the world to us and give meaning to its joys and tragedies."

***Agenda***

Regarding the LFSJ agenda on show in this 97-article sample we would like to make three divergent observations. The first is that while the initial hypothesis that LFSJ could be used as a platform for a wider sporting menu held true in the case of *L'Équipe Explore* -with 23 sports covered in just 39 articles- this is not necessarily the case of *SI* where the stats show that not only are fewer sports covered (14 out of 58 articles) but that nearly 60% of them are exclusively dedicated to basketball, football and baseball. The *SI* long form project is therefore more conservative in its editorial choices than its French counterpart, in part down to the overwhelming nature of the coverage dedicated to the Big Three by its parent company publication and its demographic –moneyed professional white male– profile. That said, minority sports do get a fair look in: bass fishing, rodeo, and wrestling in the US case and mountaineering, sailing, surfing, trailing, base jumping, chess, dancing, free diving, and e-sports in *L'Équipe*. The intelligent use of multimedia applications and the deployment of engaging storytelling techniques is of heightened importance here as the writer must convince an initially more sceptical reader that his subject matter is worth reading to the end.

Secondly, while the sample does offer a variety of sports, we can observe the concessions made to the respective local audiences. *L'Équipe Explore* elevates soccer and cycling to the top of the list while in the case of *SI Longform* this can be seen in the number of stories dedicated to US sports industries such as the NBA or NFL but also in its dedication to US-only stories such as rodeo riders, college basketball or American horse races, editorial decisions which, while well narrated, still limit the possibilities of transcending the national sports fan market.

Thirdly, the inclusion of wider contextual issues on the LFSJ agenda also offers material for discussion. For example, the dramatic results regarding gender on the agenda offers a clear indication of one field where LFSJ has a large margin for improvement. Not only are female athletes absent -3 out of 97 stories – but so too are female sports writers. When women do appear it is often in secondary roles as fans or halftime entertainers. However, race issues are prominent (particularly in *SI Longform*), health stories abound (quarterback concussions, rugby tackles, doping in cycling) as do

geopolitical themes (Sochi Olympics, the Cold War background to the Sabonis story) which are constantly present. Pop culture issues appear in *SI*'s street basketball feature along with the YouTube-fest dedicated to the NFL halftime show. In this sense, the common denominator of both LFSJ platforms is their parallel telling of a specific sports story in a wider social context, a technique necessary to fully understand the impact and relevance of the story in hand.

### *Multimedia applications*

Results show that multimedia convergence is a clear feature of the long form digital sports story. As Chris Stone, editorial director at *SI* put it, "How can we begin to cover sports without understanding, appreciating and explaining the role of the nexus of tech and sports"? (Baysinger 2016). The list of techniques employed from formats to templates, extra-textual features such as large-format photography, diagrams, interactive collages, YouTube footage and the whole range of interactive elements from parallax scrolling to infographics lead the reader-user on an immersive multi-sensory experience. However, beyond the aesthetic pleasure of navigating through such design embellishments, many of the LFSJ stories in the sample benefit directly from such applications thanks to their capacity for helping the reader visualize the dimensions of an avalanche or a tidal wave. The multimedia applications allow the user to return to the stories or skip elements in which they have lesser interest. A click on visual media or photo galleries allows the reader to dictate how far he or she wishes to delve into a story and taking him to a different temporal interface with the text. The sense of control and the ability to explore the story in customized fashion is of undoubted appeal to the tablet-bearing public to which it addresses itself. The results are uneven when it comes to multimedia use. There is no "standard template". *L'Équipe Explore* uses more -and much longer- videos and more photos. A third of all *SI* stories have no video links at all. Hyperlinks are limited to maintain reader loyalty. As regards the use of multimedia convergent technology, both *SI* and *L'Équipe* have found a comfortable midway point between the excesses of John Branch's 2012 ground-breaking but logistically unrepeatable "Snowfall" piece in the *New York Times* and the random incorporation of YouTube and photo archive material. In almost all the sample stories, multimedia use is controlled, relevant and journalistically justifiable.

### *The role of long form in the commercial strategy of media companies*

The self-referencing nature of many of the stories -particularly in the case of *SI*- is also a standout feature of their long form projects. According to Bourdieu, "an art which ever increasingly contains reference to its own history demands to be perceived historically; it asks not to be an external reference…but to the universe of past and present works of art" (Bourdieu 2013, 27). This phenomenon manifests itself in many different ways particularly in the case of *SI Longform*. Firstly, the site constantly pushes its "From the vault" section featuring its self-proclaimed "classic articles" in a strategic attempt to link history, tradition, authority and prestige as part of what Chris Stone, the editorial director of *Sports Illustrated*, refers to as a "premium content experience" (Lichterman 2016).

Secondly, some articles contain video links to Sports Illustrated TV where *SI* writers discuss aspects of the story under consideration from a small television set. Thirdly, some of the *SI* writers convert themselves into the main protagonists of the story. Three striking examples come to mind here: reporter Michael McKnight's 363-

day journey to learn how to slam dunk; a feature article on *SI* photographer Neil Leifer or SI writer Alexander Wolff's purchase of an American Basketball Association team.

*L'Équipe Explore* also displays a wide range of self-referencing techniques. In this sense no less than 15 members of staff are dedicated to the marketing side of the web (Alyce 2014). Staff journalists are fully versed in SEO techniques when writing their articles and, as Frederic Waringuez, assistant editor at the French sports daily recognizes, "we use all possible forms of leverage to optimize our traffic. The notoriety of a brand such as *L'Équipe* allows us to generate a high number of direct visits and SEO strategies are one of our main priorities." In an attempt to make this project profitable, production costs are reduced by pooling human resources, by extending coverage on articles previously covered in shorter form for the print version of the brand and by delving further into the archives. Every edition of *L'Équipe Explore* receives a full page article in the print version and in the case of the major webdocs, a 52-minute televised version is edited for the brand's own channel -*L'Équipe 21*- as part of a multimedia synergy package (Hacquin 2013). External sponsors are also now a feature as *L'Équipe Explore* is averaging close to 500,000 unique visits per article (Poiroux 2014) alongside the gradual expansion of the MyLEquipe app available on IOS and Android. Access is offered to PDF articles originally published at either *L'Équipe* or *L'Équipe Magazine* or by paying homage to *L'Équipe* newspaper in "Joyeux anniversaire. 70 ans d'histoire(s)" which offers a detailed history of the publication from 1946 to 2016 and its milestones throughout the years. The article presents several historical materials from *L'Équipe* newspaper, including front pages (which readers can download in high resolution), articles, images and video archives. As a further element of brand reinforcing, one of the videos also features images of high profile athletes and coaches reading *L'Équipe*. All these self-referencing strategies form part of a concerted effort to further widen the *L'Équipe* brand through internet. In this sense, the publication also offers subsidiary products such as the Ebillet ticketing service, EVoyages for sports-related trips or the sale of sports shirts all through the online brand called the EStore which in the words of Emmanuel Alix, Director of the group's Digital Hub, all respond to the "qualified and influential nature of the audience of L'Équipe's website" (Internet Retailer, 2016).

This constant self-citation forms part of the deployment of the long form option as a commercial brand-building tool and is further evidence as Stone at *SI* recognizes that the core print product is no longer a "sustainable business model" (Lichterman, 2016). As Dowling and Vogan point out, the very use of the subtitle "Longform since 1954" by *Sports Illustrated* is a way of cultivating prestige, reaffirming its position as the dean of long form journalism and is "an initiative that exploits long form's meaning to suggest the magazine had been producing such complex works for decades using long form's cachet to expand on its traditional reputation as a relatively highbrow sports publication…(it) functions as an opportunity for these prominent media organizations to build a branded sense of renown in an increasingly competitive market" (2015, 217).

Academics aside, specialists in the commercial field also recognize the leveraging power that long form journalism provides when communicating an organization's brand. In this sense, Barb Palser, vice president of Internet Broadcasting, which provides digital publishing, content and ad operations services to local media companies told *USA Today* that "investing in quality talent and producing great examples of reporting and interactive storytelling can have an important brand-building effect." (Rieder 2013) The strategic option for long form sports journalism goes beyond profit concerns as it constitutes a useful weapon in the race for the growing demographic of (largely male) tablet users and the sustenance of a carefully constructed institutional

identity that operates across all platforms. As Dowling and Vogan (2015, 211) point out, "digital longform features often operate as loss leaders for their parent companies…they do not directly generate profits but build a branded sense of symbolic capital that leads to economic profits in less direct ways". Sport itself is particularly useful as it has "historically delivered moneyed adult male consumers to advertisers more effectively than other mainstream media genres (Dowling and Vogan 2015, 212) From a brand positioning angle, long form is a win-win option in that it brings prestige to the stereotyped low-brow reputation of sports journalism and serves to expand the demographic reach and market share of the parent company under which it operates.

## Conclusion

This article has attempted to trace the emergence of online long-form sports journalism as an exponent of slow journalism and other contemporary dynamics in the profession. A thorough examination of the stories published by two prestigious media outlets has been provided, allowing the researchers to present a comprehensive radiography of both publications. The research has revealed the similarities and differences used by the two online platforms in terms of agenda and convergence. Fundamental cornerstones, such as the range of disciplines and relevant contextual issues covered, the salient angles and approaches chosen, the sources employed, the alternative narratives and multimedia applications displayed or the brand-building strategies underlying the contents have been identified. While the study presents a largely positive vision of the LFSJ projects under consideration here, it does not shy away from highlighting areas where the authors feel changes could be made, particularly in the fields of gender representation and an excessive ethnocentrism in the choice of sports to be showcased.

To widen the scope of the comparative analysis presented here and to capture an even greater idea of the LFSJ community, further work could be carried out to include the contents published by other specialized outlets such as *ESPN.com*, *SBNation* or *NBC SportsWorld*. Content analysis could be supplemented by in-depth interviews with editors and journalists to allow for an in-depth examination of their values, the newsrooms' cultures in which they operate, their creation processes, professional routines and their attitudes toward long-form sports journalism. Ethnographic data regarding reader reception would also help to discern their expectations about and interface with long-form products. It will also enable researchers to know more about the users' experience as consumers and the ways in which they engage with the digital long-form narratives and will allow us to make solid projections regarding the future consolidation of this genre.

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## TABLES

**TABLE 1**
Sports agenda at *Sports Illustrated Longform* and *L'Équipe Explore*

| | Sports Illustrated Lonform | | L'Équipe Explore | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Sport** | ***n*** | **%** | ***n*** | **%** |
| Athletics | 2.25 | 3.88 | 2 | 5.13 |
| Basejump | 0 | 0.00 | 1 | 2.56 |
| Baseball | 7.25 | 12.50 | 0 | 0.00 |
| Basketball | 14.25 | 24.57 | 2 | 5.13 |
| Bass fishing | 1 | 1.72 | 0 | 0.00 |
| Boxing | 3 | 5.17 | 1 | 2.56 |
| Chess | 0 | 0.00 | 1 | 2.56 |
| Dancing | 0 | 0.00 | 1 | 2.56 |
| E-Sports | 0 | 0.00 | 1 | 2.56 |
| Cycling | 0 | 0.00 | 5 | 12.82 |
| Fighting | 0 | 0.00 | 1 | 2.56 |
| Football (US) | 13.25 | 22.84 | 0 | 0.00 |
| Golf | 0 | 0.00 | 1 | 2.56 |
| Hockey | 3 | 5.17 | 0 | 0.00 |
| Horse riding | 2 | 3.45 | 1 | 2.56 |
| Mountaineering | 0 | 0.00 | 1 | 2.56 |
| Racing | 1 | 1.72 | 1 | 2.56 |
| Rodeo | 1 | 1.72 | 0 | 0.00 |
| Rugby | 0 | 0.00 | 4 | 10.26 |
| Sailing | 0 | 0.00 | 1 | 2.56 |
| Scuba Diving | 0 | 0.00 | 1 | 2.56 |
| Soccer | 4 | 6.90 | 7 | 17.95 |
| Surfing | 0 | 0.00 | 1 | 2.56 |
| Swimming | 0 | 0.00 | 1 | 2.56 |
| Tennis | 1 | 1.72 | 1 | 2.56 |
| Trailing | 0 | 0.00 | 1 | 2.56 |
| Winter sports | 4 | 6.90 | 2 | 5.13 |
| Wrestling | 1 | 1.72 | 0 | 0.00 |
| Multisport | 0 | 0.00 | 1 | 2.56 |
| **Total** | **58** | **100.00** | **39** | **100.00** |

**TABLE 2**
Gender of protagonists at *Sports Illustrated Longform* and *L'Équipe Explore*

| | Sports Illustrated Longform | | L'Équipe Explore | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Gender** | ***n*** | **%** | ***n*** | **%** |
| Men | 45 | 77.59 | 34 | 87.18 |
| Women | 2 | 3.45 | 1 | 2.56 |
| Mixed | 9 | 15.52 | 4 | 10.26 |
| Neutral | 2 | 3.45 | 0 | 0.00 |
| **Total** | **58** | **100.00** | **39** | **100.00** |

**TABLE 3**
Nationality of protagonists at *Sports Illustrated Longform* and *L'Équipe Explore*

| | Sports Illustrated Longform | | L'Équipe Explore | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Nationality** | ***n*** | **%** | ***n*** | **%** |
| Home athletes | 49 | 84.48 | 13 | 33.33 |
| International | 9 | 15.52 | 26 | 66.67 |
| **Total** | **58** | **100.00** | **39** | **100.00** |

**TABLE 4**
Types of sources quoted in the websites

| | SI Longform | | L'Équipe Explore | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Sources** | ***n pieces*** | **%** | ***n pieces*** | **%** |
| Sports reporters (past and present) | 30 | 51.72 | 13 | 33.33 |
| Journalists/editors from other news desks | 6 | 10.34 | 4 | 10.26 |
| Athletes | 26 | 44.83 | 29 | 74.36 |
| Former athletes | 37 | 63.79 | 31 | 79.49 |
| Coaches and performance directors | 34 | 58.62 | 28 | 71.79 |
| Institutions/ organizations | 24 | 41.38 | 24 | 61.54 |
| Private companies | 8 | 13.79 | 7 | 17.95 |
| News agencies | 31 | 53.45 | 11 | 28.21 |
| National and international media | 35 | 60.34 | 25 | 64.10 |
| Websites | 6 | 10.34 | 1 | 2.56 |
| Social networking sites and blogs | 3 | 5.17 | 3 | 7.69 |
| Scholars, experts and analysts | 8 | 13.79 | 13 | 33.33 |
| Books and specialized publications | 16 | 27.59 | 18 | 46.15 |
| Other sources | 28 | 48.28 | 23 | 58.97 |

**TABLE 5**
Extension of the texts published in *SI Longform* and *L'Équipe Explore*

| | Sports Illustrated Longform | | L'Équipe Explore | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Length of the articles** | ***n*** | **%** | ***n*** | **%** |
| Less than 20,000 characters | 9 | 15.52 | 12 | 30.77 |
| 20,001 to 25,000 characters | 7 | 12.07 | 0 | 0.00 |
| 25,001 to 30,000 characters | 6 | 10.34 | 0 | 0.00 |
| 30,001 to 35,000 characters | 10 | 17.24 | 1 | 2.56 |
| 35,001 to 40,000 characters | 8 | 13.79 | 2 | 5.13 |
| 40,001 to 45,000 characters | 4 | 6.90 | 3 | 7.69 |
| 45,001 to 50,000 characters | 7 | 12.07 | 7 | 17.95 |
| 50,001 to 55,000 characters | 0 | 0.00 | 7 | 17.95 |
| 55,001 to 60,000 characters | 2 | 3.45 | 3 | 7.69 |
| 60,001 to 65,000 characters | 1 | 1.72 | 4 | 10.26 |
| 65,001 to 70,000 characters | 1 | 1.72 | 0 | 0.00 |
| 70,001 to 75,000 characters | 0 | 0.00 | 0 | 0.00 |
| + 75,000 characters | 3 | 5.17 | 0 | 0.00 |
| **Total** | **58** | **100.00** | **39** | **100.00** |

**TABLE 6**
Number and percentage of pieces where videos were included

| | Sports Illustrated Longform | | L'Équipe Explore | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Videos** | ***n* pieces** | **%** | ***n* pieces** | **%** |
| Yes | 38 | 65.52 | 39 | 100.00 |
| No | 20 | 34.48 | 0 | 0.00 |
| **Total** | **58** | **100.00** | **39** | **100.00** |

**TABLE 7**
Length of the videos published at *SI Longform* and *L'Équipe Explore*

| | SI Longform | | L'Équipe Explore | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Length of the video footage** | ***n* pieces** | **%** | ***n* pieces** | **%** |
| 1-60 seconds (1 minute or less) | 4 | 10.53 | 1 | 2.56 |
| 61-300 seconds (1 to 5 minutes) | 9 | 23.68 | 1 | 2.56 |
| 301-600 (5 minutes to 10 minutes) | 10 | 26.32 | 2 | 5.13 |
| + 600 (more than 10 minutes) | 15 | 39.47 | 35 | 89.74 |
| **Total** | **38** | **100.00** | **39** | **100.00** |

**TABLE 8**
Deployment of multimedia elements

| | SI Longform | | L'Équipe Explore | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Multimedia elements** | ***n* pieces** | **%** | ***n* pieces** | **%** |
| Photo-galleries | 24 | 41.38 | 15 | 38.46 |
| Timelines/ chronologies | 7 | 12.07 | 8 | 20.51 |
| Maps | 2 | 3.45 | 12 | 30.77 |
| Graphics and infographics | 4 | 6.90 | 31 | 79.49 |
| Interactive videos | 0 | 0.00 | 2 | 5.13 |
| Interactive collages | 2 | 3.45 | 2 | 5.13 |
| Audio | 9 | 15.52 | 4 | 10.26 |
| Other interactive applications | 6 | 10.34 | 7 | 17.95 |

**TABLE 9**
Number of LFSJ articles that include hyperlinks

| | Sports Illustrated Longform | | L'Équipe Explore | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Hyperlinks** | ***n* pieces** | **%** | ***n* pieces** | **%** |
| Yes | 4 | 6.90 | 8 | 20.51 |
| No | 54 | 93.10 | 31 | 79.49 |
| **Total** | **58** | **100.00** | **39** | **100.00** |