

The impact of the covid-19 pandemic on sports – reporting in the daily newspapers of the Czech Republic

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ABSTRACT

The Czech quality (non-tabloid) nationwide daily newspapers never published fewer sports pages during the two first decades of twenty-first century than they did during the COVID-19 pandemic. A reduction in the number of pages devoted to sports and other topics was a logical reaction to the paralysis of professional sports and many other domains of human life. But a comparison of data from the first wave of the pandemic, from March to May of 2020 with the same period in the following years proves that the trend to downsize sports sections continued in many cases. This study applied quantitative content analysis to the Monday editions of the Czech daily newspapers *Hospodářské noviny*, *Lidové noviny*, *Mladá fronta Dnes*, and *Právo*. It confirmed that the position of sport in the daily newspapers has weakened in the long term, and the pandemic accelerated the tendency, especially in the case of more specialised daily newspapers.

KEYWORDS

sports journalism; print media; lockdown; suspension of sports events; reduction of sports content

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INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 could have been like previous even-numbered years, full of the most prestigious sporting events. Tokyo was preparing to host the Olympic Games and twelve stadiums in different countries had been chosen for a special edition of football's European Championship celebrating that tournament's sixtieth anniversary. In the Czech Republic, ice hockey fans were anticipating the world championships to be held in Switzerland. Due to the pandemic, the Olympics and the Euro Cup were postponed until 2021, and the hockey championship was cancelled altogether. The organisers of

other sporting events had to react as well: the most famous tennis tournament, Wimbledon, was not held at all, and the Roland Garros Grand Slam and the prestigious Tour de France cycling race were moved into autumn instead of spring or summer as usual.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected all domains of human life, and sport was no exception. If the seemingly never-ending flow of sports events had to stop for a couple of months, so did the sports content produced by the media. The consequences of the pandemic for sports journalism are the main subject of this research. This paper focuses on the sports sections of selected daily newspapers in the Czech Republic during the first weeks of the pandemic, in the spring of 2020 when all the domestic sports competitions were postponed or, more often, cancelled. The main foreign events of the European football leagues, including international matches, the UEFA Champions League, and the Europa League re-started after an enforced pause of two months.

This research focused on newspapers because from a historical perspective, they represent the traditional media, and also because the print media faced special problems in the crisis. Although public demand for information grew stronger, the newspapers contended with a large decrease in sales because people were forced to stay home. This resulted in a 20 percent reduction in newspaper sales in April 2020 (Mediaguru, 2020a). Losses in the print media's advertising revenues were even more critical – down 34 percent in the same month of 2020 (Mediaguru, 2020b).

This article is based on quantitative analysis. It describes how in a crisis the print media rearranged the standard column inches devoted to sports. It deals exclusively with the newspapers' Monday editions, which in the Czech Republic contain the most robust sports section of the week. The findings compare the weeks of spring 2020 with the corresponding period of the preceding year, 2019, and the following year, 2021. The results are also compared to long-term trends discovered by previous research that monitored the sports pages of the newspapers from the beginning of the twenty-first century.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The program for some sporting events is published a few years in advance, including the organizing country, the host cities, the required stadiums, and a detailed plan for all games and races, often with the cooperation of broadcasters. Some prestigious events have traditionally set their dates decades in advance. In that sense, sports journalism differs from other news reporting and profits from knowing a fixed program in advance (Andrews, 2017). As journalism and sport co-evolved, sports media gained popularity and attracted the attention of a wide audience. The importance and power of sports in society greatly increased during the second half of the twentieth century thanks to the broad reach of the mass media. McChesney described this relationship as “*symbiotic*” (McChesney, 1989, p. 67).

Suddenly and unexpectedly in March 2020, there were almost no football matches or other sporting events. The cancellation of matches or playing them without any spectators (so-called “*ghost games*”) threw sports organizations into financial trouble. Horky (2020, p. 101) explains: “*Professional sport is essentially a public performance – for media and broadcasting or for real spectators*”. Suddenly, there were no live broadcasts on TV or radio stations, no live reports on Internet websites or mobile applications, and no commentaries or expert analyses in the newspapers. The newspapers

had to react and find substitutes for the standard sports content that was missing as a consequence of government lockdowns.

Substitutes for regular sports content

According to previous studies of various types of media (newspapers, websites, and TV stations) from different countries (including the United States and Germany), it is possible to identify some subjects and themes that that media chose as substitutes for sports reporting. They replaced the missing content with 1) news about COVID-19 and its consequences (Sadri et al., 2022); 2) timeless stories, mainly from sports history (Schallhorn & Kunert, 2020); and 3) new content covering themes not hitherto discussed in the media (Goldman & Hedlund, 2020). The space devoted to sports could be also reduced. Sports reporters helped out in other departments of their media, covering other topics (Gentile et al., 2022).

Instead of traditional sports news, much information was reported concerning COVID-19 and the then-actual situation in sport, including restrictions and the possible consequences of the lockdowns for future sports events and training. Sadri et al. (2022) focused mainly on different framing of sports content in the United States media. They identified the most-used frames: health, economics, quality of life, fairness, and morality – which resulted in broader reporting than the usual sports reporting focused on the outcomes of matches.

Some TV stations substituted archived recordings of content for actual live broadcasts. Schallhorn & Kunert (2020) state that some German TV channels chose to re-broadcast memorable, dramatic games from history on the anniversary of the dates they took place before the pandemic. They called this “*turning the old into new*” (Schallhorn & Kunert, 2020, p. 516). Hull and Romney (2020) confirm the same trend but add that local sports broadcasters do not have a very large archive, which limits their options. Fans and supporters appreciated this re-run of history, for example, of the days in 1974 and 2014 when Germany won the football World Cup (Schallhorn & Kunert, 2020, p. 517). The re-broadcast of the World Cup final against Argentina in 2014 was followed by an “*unbelievable 1.67 million viewers in Germany*” (Horky, 2020, p. 100). On the other hand, rebroadcasting these games provoked criticism because the games lacked suspense, could simply be boring, and begged the question: “*Is that what we want from sports?*” (Schallhorn & Kunert, 2020, p. 517)

When traditional sports events were cancelled, new ones like e-sports could take the spotlight. Johnson & Woodcock (2021) remind us that the popularity of e-sports was growing even before the pandemic, but the new circumstances and more prominent media coverage boosted their popularity. Grix et al. (2020) note the significant growth of e-sports and expect immense attention on them in the future on the part of the International Olympic Committee. Horky agrees: “*The transformation of real sports into their digital versions is getting significant attention*” (Horky, 2020, p. 101).

Print newspapers

The reaction of print newspapers is relevant for the future of this traditional media. During the two first decades of the twenty-first century, the future of the daily press became the subject of controversy, as it did with the advent of radio and television in the twentieth. But this time, in competition with the so-called new media, the debate

was more intense than ever before. Despite the problems faced by the print media in terms of decreasing circulations and lower revenues resulting in the Czech Republic in the closure of *Lidové noviny* in August 2024 (Mediaguru, 2024), newspapers have not perished (Edge, 2019; O'Sullivan et al., 2017), at least for the moment. Nevertheless, the fate of their sports sections is unclear.

On the one hand, sports reporting is an attractive and desired kind of journalism, without which the media cannot attract a wide audience (Andrews, 2017; Toney, 2014). During previous decades, sports reporting was taking up more and more space in the newspapers (Biscomb & Matheson, 2017). In the Czech context, one can cite the example of *Lidové noviny* (Děkanovský, 2008). This traditional Czech newspaper reduced its coverage of sport in the late twentieth century but renewed its sports section later so as not to lose readers. Still, the situation not only at *Lidové noviny* has changed significantly with the advent of the “*new media*”, which includes online news, the official websites of sports clubs, social networks, etc. The natural advantages and benefits of the internet make it “*the best medium for sports fans*” (Real, 2006, p. 183). The impact of the new competitor on the media scene was so great that this period is often called the “*digital revolution*” (Bradshaw & Minogue, 2019, p. 6).

The “*revolution*” deeply impacted sports sections in daily newspapers. Some forms of sports journalism simply could not compete with the internet. Match scores, statistics, pure descriptions of games, transfers and rumours are now found more easily and accessed more quickly in the stream of online information (Billings, Butterworth & Turman, 2018) thanks to journalism-as-process model (Moritz, 2015). The impact of social media on sports communication is also crucial (Nölleke, Grimmer & Horky, 2016). Therefore, some daily newspapers have reduced the number of pages they publish containing such information about sports, replacing it with sports commentary and analysis, some have even eliminated the whole sports section (Billings, Butterworth & Turman, 2018). The future of that traditional section of newspapers is uncertain (Hodgson, 2020), while online journalism become more attractive and perspective type of media sports production (Kian & Zimmerman, 2012).

Evidence of this trend appeared in the Czech media between 2001 and 2015, for example, in the nationwide quality newspapers *Hospodářské noviny*, *Lidové noviny*, and *Mladá fronta Dnes*, and to some extent in *Právo* (Trunečka, 2021). The number of pages those newspapers devoted to sport has decreased gradually since the economic crisis of 2008. Content has changed from straight sports news reporting into more sophisticated forms of sports journalism. This study analyses the immediate reaction of newspapers during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, but also examines the following years 2021 and 2023 to discover potential long-term consequences of the pandemic.

The beginning of the pandemic in the Czech Republic

It was precisely the first day of March 2020 when the Czech Republic announced its first three cases of people who tested positive for the novel coronavirus (ČTK, 2020a). The very next day, the Czech National Security Council decided that the Biathlon World Cup would be held without an audience in Nové Město na Moravě because of the risks linked to the expected presence of tens of thousands of visitors, many of them from abroad (ČTK, 2020b). Other main events, including the domestic football and ice hockey leagues, continued without any restrictions. The most prestigious football

match, Slavia vs. Sparta, was played on 8 March with almost twenty thousand supporters in the stands (ČTK, 2020c).

The following week was crucial. First, on Tuesday, the government approved an attendance limit of one hundred people for any sporting event. The decision still allowed sports on the professional level, but without the presence of any fans (ČTK, 2020d). Just two days later, the government forbade all sports activities involving more than thirty people and restricted access to sports venues. Professional sport in the Czech Republic effectively ceased (ČTK, 2020e). As a consequence, the football association postponed all its matches. For the first time since 1945, the ice hockey league terminated its season prematurely without determining a new champion (ČTK, 2020f). Similar postponements and cancellations were announced in other countries.

The weekend of 14–15 March was the first one without public sports competitions, and this state of affairs remained the same until the second half of May. The Czech football league re-started on 23 May (ČTK, 2020g), albeit with hygienic restrictions and without the presence of supporters. This was one week later than the German football league, which was the first in Europe to resume matches (ČTK, 2020h). The football was the only one from among the other major sports in the Czech Republic to try to complete its season. It was almost completely successful, except for a few last matches in the relegation group. Many sports seasons terminated without a new champion, or winners were decided according to pre-lockdown results (Table 1).

Table 1 The decisions in some long-term team competitions in the Czech Republic

Sport	Men/Women	Date	Decision	Champion
Football	Men	12th March	Postponed	Slavia Prague
Football	Women	4th April	Terminated	Slavia Prague
Ice-hockey	Men	12th March	Terminated	–
Ice-hockey	Women	12th March	Terminated	–
Basketball	Men	18th March	Terminated	Nymburk
Basketball	Women	13th March	Terminated	USK Prague
Handball	Men	5th April	Terminated	–
Handball	Women	31st March	Terminated	–
Volleyball	Men	16th March	Terminated	–
Volleyball	Women	16th March	Terminated	–
Floorball	Men	13th March	Terminated	–
Floorball	Women	13th March	Terminated	–

Sources of data: News agency ČTK and official websites of selected sports associations

RESEARCH AIM

This research in the area of sports communication studies deals with daily newspapers as representatives of the traditional sports media. It describes the transforma-

tion and evolution of their sports sections from the beginning of the twenty-first century (between 2001 and 2015) (Trunečka, 2017; Trunečka, 2021) and adds information for subsequent years until 2023. This period includes the COVID-19 global pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

To begin the analysis of how the sports sections of daily newspapers reacted to the suspension of sporting events, three research questions were specified. They focus on the situation during the COVID-19 pandemic and on the print media specifically with the long-term consequences.

RQ1: Did the space devoted to sports in the selected media change during the first wave of the pandemic?

RQ2: What kind of content did the newspapers publish in the period without public sporting events?

RQ3: During 2021 and 2023, after the first wave of pandemic, was the number of sports pages the same as before COVID-19?

The analysis of content published in print media reflects four main categories (journalists, their routines, created and published content, effects) in sports communication studies (Wanta, 2013; Sherwood & Nicholson, 2013). Quantitative content analysis (as defined by Creswell, 2014 and specifically with regard to sports by Gratton & Jones, 2004) was used to answer the research questions. Hypotheses corresponding to the research questions were formed based on the literature review, as follows:

H1: The chosen newspapers would reduce the space they devoted to sports during the first wave of the pandemic.

H2: The information from competitions and the results would be replaced by news about COVID-19, historical topics, and other alternative content.

H3: The number of sports pages would grow after the first wave of the pandemic when sports competitions re-started.

The sample

The sample set consists of nationwide, general circulation, quality newspapers published continuously in the Czech Republic from 2001 until 2023, when this study was completed: *Hospodářské noviny* (published by Economia), *Lidové noviny* (published by Mafra; later in August 2024, the publication was terminated), *Mladá fronta Dnes* (published by Mafra) and *Právo* (published by Borgis). All the newspapers can be considered general circulation, although the first two, *Hospodářské noviny* and *Lidové noviny* are, respectively were a little bit more oriented toward economic and political/cultural topics, respectively. They had in the selected period lower circulations than the other two newspapers. *Mladá fronta Dnes* and *Právo* represent the typical general-circulation newspaper in the Czech Republic. They are the most-read newspapers in the quality-press segment. The selection of the four newspapers is an opportunity to examine not only the situation in 2020–2023 but also changes that have occurred within a more prolonged period from the beginning of the twenty-first century. The other daily newspapers in the Czech Republic are either tabloids or focus on regional reporting. The daily newspaper *Sport* (published by

Czech News Center) was not included because of its specific focus. It differs from the sports sections of the general newspapers.

The research focused exclusively on the Monday editions of the newspapers, which usually summarise the competitions of the previous week and offer the strongest sports content of the whole week. *Lidové noviny*, *Mladá fronta Dnes*, and *Právo* published sports sections every day. *Hospodářské noviny* had already reduced its sports coverage significantly before the pandemic, but it was publishing at least one page devoted to sport, just on Monday.

Methodology

In the first step, this study employed quantitative analysis of sports coverage in daily newspapers during the period from the beginning of March 2020 until mid-May 2020. That period included two weeks of the standard sports season (although COVID-19 had already been diagnosed in the country as of March 1) and two months when professional and amateur sports were completely suspended. Except for Easter Monday, when Czech newspapers are not published, the sample covered ten weeks with ten Monday editions to analyse. For every day of the period, the total number of pages in the newspapers and the number of sports pages were recorded. This was also done for the same period of the preceding year, 2019, to provide a clear comparison with a period not affected by COVID-19.

In the second step, the study focused on the content of the sports sections. It analysed topics published in the sports sections, paying special attention to COVID-19 news. Every article (other than short news reports in graphic formats) was coded according to its predominant theme: 1) content strictly related to the pandemic (news about postponements and cancellations of competitions, the reactions of athletes and sports institutions, and athletes' alternative forms of training); 2) content unrelated to COVID-19 (competitions taking place without any restriction, other current information); 3) 'timeless' content (e.g., historical events, memorable past sporting events, interviews unrelated to the then-actual situation); 4) other content or a mix of different topics without a prevailing theme.

The third step in the process was to determine if the changes in the structure of the newspapers' sports sections were temporary or long-term, as measured during the same ten-week period of the following year, 2021. The same period in the year 2023 was analysed as well. The same quantitative technique, counting the number of sports pages, was used.

Ethical aspects of the study

Before presenting the findings of this study, it is necessary to mention one of its ethical aspects, a potential conflict of interest. During the period under study, I held the post of editor-in-chief of the sports departments of both *Lidové noviny* and *Mladá fronta Dnes*. I declare that I undertook this study exclusively as a researcher employed by the Faculty of Social Sciences at Charles University and I respected all ethical standards for research in every part of it. I used only publicly available information. I did not evaluate any of the editorial strategies of the selected newspapers. All this research can be replicated, and all the findings presented can be verified, as is allowed by the quantitative research method.

FINDINGS

Reduction in the number of sports pages

According to the results of the quantitative analysis, three of the four selected newspapers decided to reduce the number of pages they devoted to sports during the eight critical weeks from mid-March to mid-May of 2020, when sports competitions were postponed or cancelled due to COVID-19. While *Hospodářské noviny* continued to publish one sports page on Monday as usual, the other newspapers, *Lidové noviny*, *Mladá fronta Dnes*, and *Právo*, eliminated almost half of their sports sections.

Before the pandemic, *Právo* regularly offered the most robust sports section of the four newspapers, with an average of seven pages. That number of pages was still published in the two initial weeks of March, the same as the preceding spring of 2019.

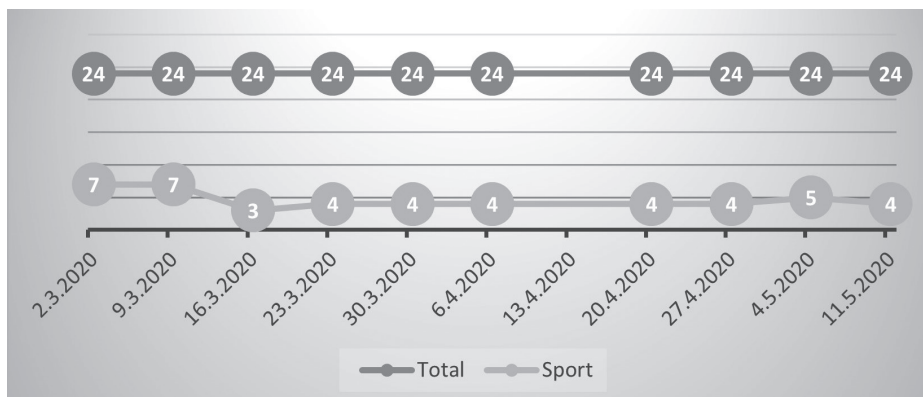


Figure 1 Právo in the Spring of 2020

Sources of data: Own research

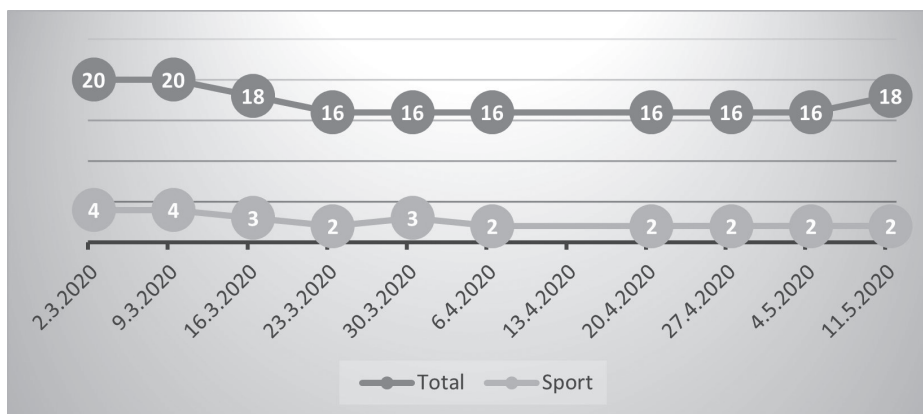


Figure 2 Mladá fronta Dnes in the Spring of 2020

Sources of data: Own research

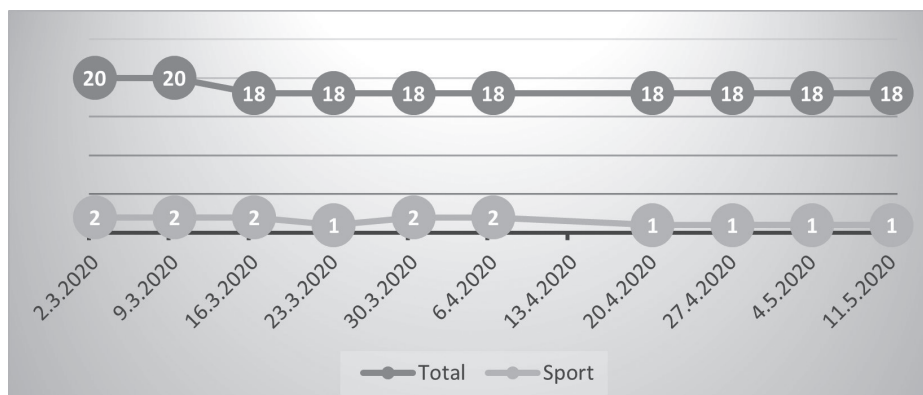


Figure 3 Lidové noviny in the Spring of 2020

Sources of data: Own research

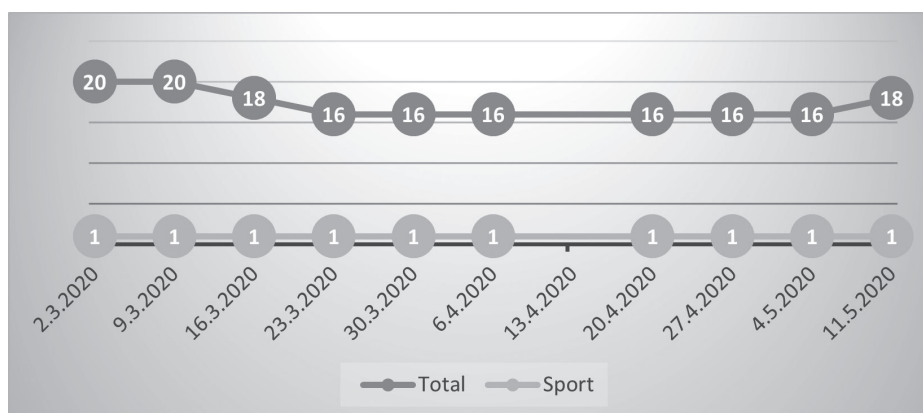


Figure 4 Hospodářské noviny in the Spring of 2020

Sources of data: Own research

Later, when sports competitions had to stop for a couple of months, *Právo* cut only its sports section down to three or more often four pages (Figure 1) but maintained its usual total number of the edition with 24 pages. The newspaper replaced the missing sports content with pages containing other information.

Mladá fronta Dnes normally published four or five sports pages on Monday in the spring of 2019, which made its sports section the second largest of the four newspapers after *Právo*. During the first two weeks of March 2020, it was still publishing four pages of sports, as it had the previous year. When the pandemic started, *Mladá fronta Dnes* downsized its sports section and the total number of pages in their Monday editions as well. The daily reduced its output by two or even four pages from the 20 it was publishing in 2019 and reduced its sports coverage from four or five pages to three, and later to two (Figure 2).

Lidové noviny behaved similarly to *Mladá fronta Dnes*, offering 18 total pages instead of 20 and one or two pages of sport instead of its usual two or even three (Figure 3).

Although *Hospodářské noviny* reacted to the new situation by reducing the total number of pages in its editions from 20 to 18 or even 16, its sports content remained unchanged during the first wave of the pandemic. The single page it normally devoted to sports was still present in every Monday edition despite the lack of regular sports competitions.

Articles on COVID-19, sports history, and hobbies

COVID-19 mainly started to influence the sports sections on Monday, 16 March. The preceding weekend of 14 and 15 March was the first without domestic league play. On the one hand, in *Právo*, *Mladá fronta Dnes*, and *Lidové noviny*, information about ongoing international competitions could be found, for example, the biathlon World Cup and the retirement of the legendary French biathlete Martin Fourcade (LN, 2020a; MFD, 2020a; *Právo*, 2020a). Furthermore, the dailies discussed the future of the Olympic Games in an interview with the head of the Czech Olympic Committee, Jiří Kejval (*Právo*, 2020b), the world championship in ice hockey (*Právo*, 2020c) and the experiences of Czech football players in Italy Antonín Barák and Lukáš Zima (MFD, 2020b; MFD, 2020c), the first European country to be hit by the pandemic.

The following Monday, 23 March, when the ice hockey world championship was cancelled, *Právo*, *Mladá fronta Dnes*, and *Lidové noviny* covered the decision in three different ways: publishing standard news about it (LN, 2020b), interviewing head coach Miloš Říha (*Právo*, 2020d), and interviewing Říha's assistant Robert Reichel (MFD, 2020d). The other articles published in the four newspapers dealt with the postponement of the Olympic Games and training programs for football players. The match results, tables, and rankings that had been key sports content disappeared almost completely. *Hospodářské noviny*, with its specific form of sports reporting (one page of sport with a single main article, only on Monday), reported on COVID-19's impact on sports. The newspaper analysed the consequences of the pandemic on the economics of football and transfers of football players (HN, 2020a) and talked about how athletes were helping in the crisis (HN, 2020b).

Although the theme of the pandemic stayed at the forefront during the selected period and the number of sports pages decreased in every newspaper, journalists managed to substitute the usual content with content not specifically related to COVID-19, including the postponement or cancellation of certain sports events, stories about athletes, and reflections on the future of sport. The most significant changes were visible in *Právo*. Before the crisis, *Právo* published seven sports pages with more than 25 articles reporting exclusively current information and results. In the spring of 2020, the newspaper's Monday editions sometimes offered only seven or eight articles on four pages, sometimes including one long interview which took up a whole page. For example, in one article the retired tennis player Tomáš Šmíd reminisced about his career (*Právo*, 2020e). Another special page focused on a retired football player, Josef Csaplár, and a retired coach, Petr Janů, who were spending their time working as lumberjacks (*Právo*, 2020f).

As the pause caused by hygienic restrictions lengthened to eight weeks, the most memorable past moments in sports became favourite alternative content. *Právo* re-

minded readers of the 1985 World Championship in ice hockey held in Prague (Právo, 2020g) *Mladá fronta Dnes* started to regularly offer a special series entitled “X Years Ago” that included stories about Czech ice hockey players Jaromír Jágr (MFD, 2020e) and Dominik Hašek (MFD, 2020f) in the U.S. National Hockey League in years past. Another article discussed the international perspective on the tragedy of the Torino football team which perished in an air crash in 1949 (MFD, 2020g). The standard content with current information about competitions reappeared in 2021.

Due to the limited space on the single page in which *Lidové noviny* reported sports news, the articles it published in the selected period of 2020 focused on reports based on archived recordings of sports broadcast on TV stations (LN, 2020c) and short reports about e-sports (LN, 2020d). *Hospodářské noviny* characterised e-sports as a strong new trend, not only a result of COVID-19 (HN, 2020c).

Different approaches after the re-start of competitions

One year later, in spring 2021, when the pandemic situation was more stable, *Právo* again offered a full sports section of seven pages on Mondays (Figure 5). Comparing the data from ten weeks in March, April, and May in three consecutive years, 2019, 2020, and 2021, the decrease in sports content appears to be attributable to the suspension of sports competitions in 2020. The structure of the newspapers did not change in 2021 or 2023 compared to 2019.

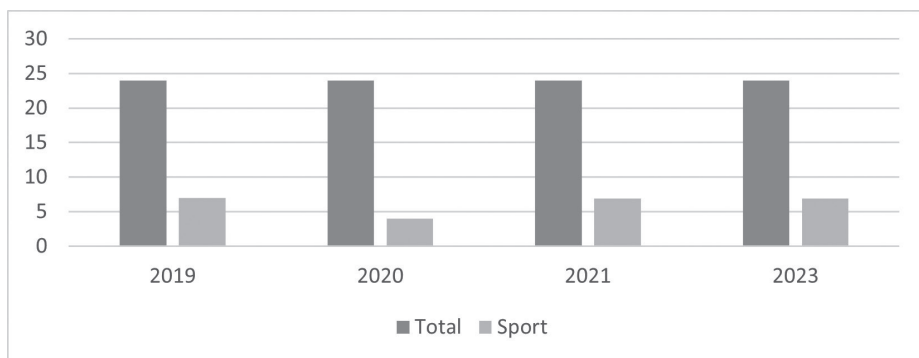


Figure 5 Average Total Pages and Sports Pages in Monday Edition of Právo

Sources of data: Own research

Mladá fronta Dnes did not restore its former structure and continued to publish reduced sports content. In 2021, the total number of pages in Monday edition ranged from 16 to 18, including three sports pages (Figure 6). The sports section later enlarged compared to the period of the first wave of COVID-19, increasing by one page, but it did not return to the size it had before the pandemic, when it had taken up four or five pages. A comparison of *Mladá fronta Dnes*'s reporting in 2019 and 2021 indicates a certain decrease not only in sports coverage, but in the size of the newspaper as a whole. Its sports section recovered proportionally to the other content.

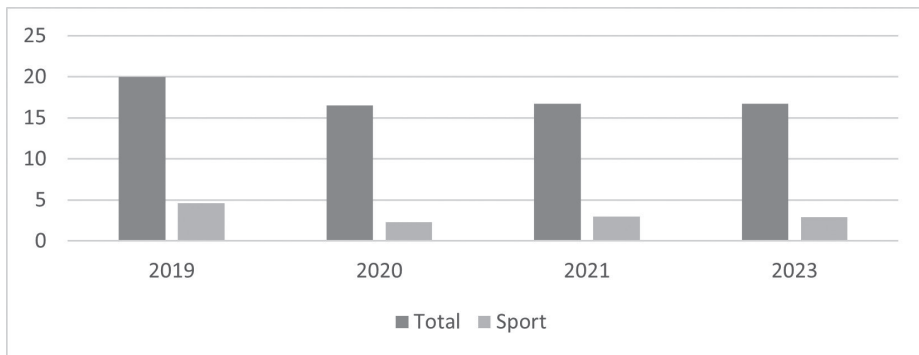


Figure 6 Average Total Pages and Sports Pages in Monday Edition of Mladá fronta Dnes

Sources of data: Own research

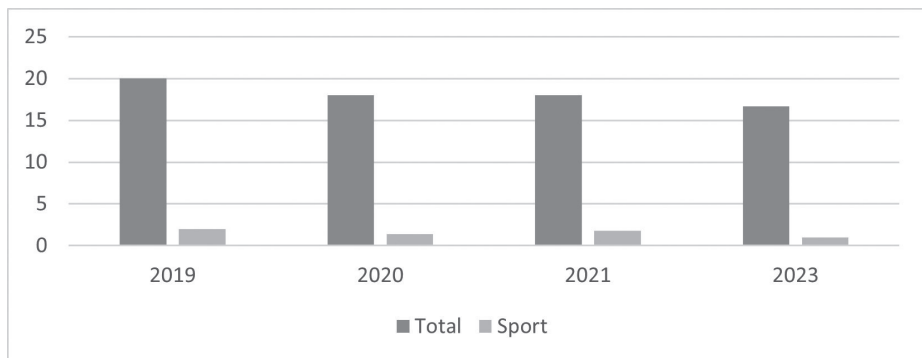


Figure 7 Average Total Pages and Sports Pages in Monday Edition of Lidové noviny

Sources of data: Own research

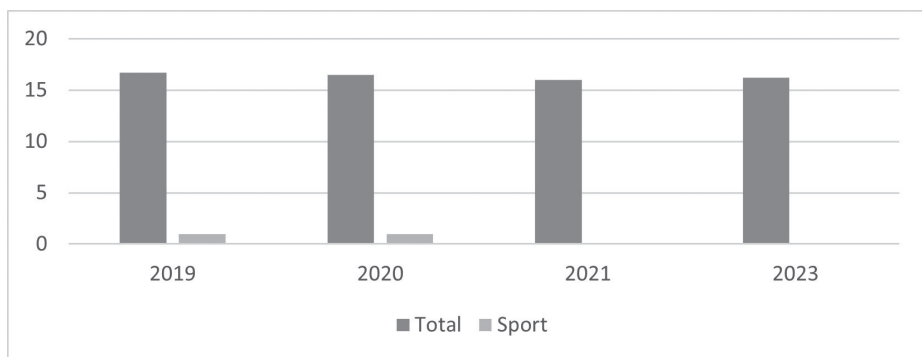


Figure 8 Average Total Pages and Sports Pages in Monday Edition of Hospodářské noviny

Sources of data: Own research

Lidové noviny reduced its overall size, publishing no more than 18 pages instead of the 20 it had published before the pandemic. Two pages, or only one, were devoted to sport in the 2021 period (Figure 7). Comparing the years 2019 and 2021, there was a tiny decrease in the number of pages devoted to sports. A bigger change was evident in the last year of the research, in 2023. Although the total number of pages published in *Lidové noviny* stayed the same, 18, the newspaper normally offered only one page of sports content. That number was even lower than it was during the first wave of COVID-19 when sports competitions were suspended. This represented a lasting change in the newspaper's structure, with sport becoming even more of a niche topic.

A major change took place in the pages of *Hospodářské noviny*. Although this daily newspaper did not downsize its Monday sports section during the first wave of the pandemic, the management decided to eliminate it altogether in the spring of 2021 in the course of a redesign of the newspaper (Mediaguru, 2021). From March 2021, there was no longer any room for permanent, regular, and expectable sports content (Figure 8).

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The COVID-19 crisis that broke out at the beginning of the year 2020 affected almost the entire world and all domains of human life for many months. Among those domains was sport in all its forms, professional, youth, and amateur. International and domestic competitions were postponed or even cancelled for hygienic reasons. The disappearance of sporting events had a major influence on the media. The consequences of the pandemic on newspaper sports reporting were the primary object of this study, which focused on the Monday editions of *Hospodářské noviny*, *Lidové noviny*, *Mladá fronta Dnes* and *Právo* as representatives of general circulation, quality (non-tabloid) daily newspapers with sports sections published continuously from 2001 to the present.

During the first wave of the pandemic, *Právo* decreased the number of its sports pages from seven in 2019 to four in 2020 and *Mladá fronta Dnes* from four or five pages to only two. In the same period, *Lidové noviny* went from two and sometimes three sports pages to only one. *Hospodářské noviny* preserved its sports section intact from 2019 to 2020, publishing one page on a dominant sports topic. The hypothesis H1, which expected a reduction in the newspapers' sports sections due to the pandemic, was confirmed, except for *Hospodářské noviny*, which already published only a minimum of sports coverage.

The results of competitions and league rankings disappeared from the newspapers and were replaced by articles about COVID-19 and all its consequences or by alternative content, mainly stories from sports history. Hypothesis H2, which predicted the substitution of other stories for regular sports content was also confirmed.

While *Právo* restored its original structure and began again to publish seven pages of sport on Mondays, *Mladá fronta Dnes* remained smaller in size after the pandemic subsided, but the number of its sports pages increased to almost three in its Monday editions. The sports section did not regain its original number of pages, but it did stay proportionally to the total size of the newspaper. However, the sports section in *Lidové noviny* shrank even more in 2023 than it did during the first wave of the pan-

demic. *Hospodářské noviny*, which maintained one sports page during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, eliminated its sports section altogether in the spring of 2021. After that, including in 2023, there was no regular, consistent sports content. Therefore, the research did not confirm Hypothesis H3, that the number of published sports pages would recover after the pandemic.

Právo's temporary reduction of sports content and the subsequent restoration of its original structure can be interpreted as a temporary reaction to an unprecedented situation. But if the reduced total size of the newspaper in the case of *Hospodářské noviny*, *Lidové noviny*, and *Mladá fronta Dnes* became the new standard, it could also suggest there were other reasons for that reduction than simply the shutdown of sporting competitions, the most likely ones being economic (Mediaguru, 2020a; 2020b). Only *Právo* appeared to resist the downsizing trend and the number of sports pages it published remained fairly constant compared to the others. This is the most important finding of the research.

The analysis confirmed that sports content is slowly being reduced or even eliminated from the pages of Czech daily newspapers. Long-term comparisons (Trunečka, 2021) demonstrate that the tendency to downsize sports sections began to appear before that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and gained steam after the financial crisis in 2008. The decrease in the size of the sports sections, except for *Právo*'s, was significant. *Hospodářské noviny* reduced from five pages in 2009 to one in 2015 and then to zero immediately after the first wave of the pandemic in 2021. *Mladá fronta Dnes* reduced from almost ten pages in 2001 and 2003 to three, and *Lidové noviny* similarly reduced from almost ten pages to two or even just one in 2023.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the rate of decline. From the perspective of the newspaper reader, the sports content published in the Monday editions of the four newspapers in spring 2020 was the least it had ever been since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Disregarding that extreme, exceptional period, the sports content published in 2021 and 2023 was still much reduced compared to the first two decades of the century. The maximum number of sports pages published in the newspapers' Monday editions was far smaller in 2021 and 2023 than it was in previous odd years, particularly in *Hospodářské noviny*, *Lidové noviny*, *Mladá fronta Dnes* (Figure 9).

Because of the very different and more extensive structure of the newspapers at the beginning of the century, with plenty of pages (some of which were transformed into separate magazine sections), it is not possible to compare the proportion of sport to the number of total pages reliably between that period and the present (Trunečka, 2021). However, the absolute number of pages now devoted to sport demonstrates that sports reporting is disappearing little by little from the printed media, mainly in the more specialised newspapers. *Hospodářské noviny* and *Lidové noviny* were rethinking how necessary sports reporting is for them. *Hospodářské noviny*, which has closed down its sports section, is one of several prominent daily newspapers that have taken that step (Billings, Butterworth & Turman, 2018). *Lidové noviny* was not far from making the same decision with the only page devoted to sports in 2023, only one year before the announcement of the closure of the newspapers. The general-circulation press (*Mladá fronta Dnes* and *Právo*) may still need to include sports among all the other news it covers.

The results prove that despite the long tradition of newspaper sports journalism and its popularity, which newspapers relied upon in the past to increase their circulation

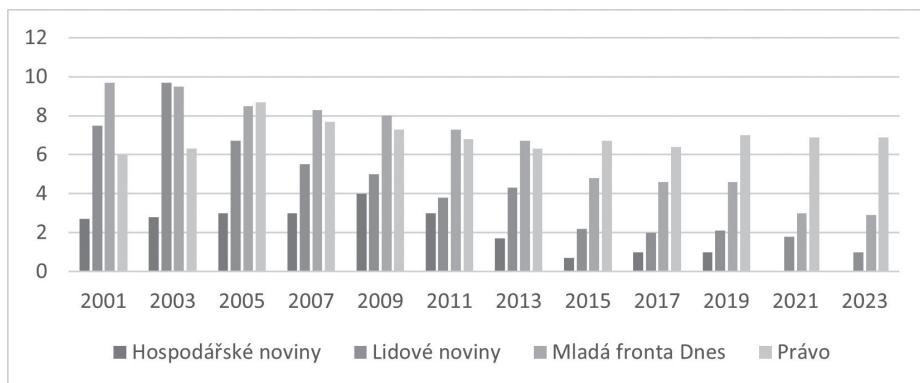


Figure 9 Average Number of Sports Pages in Monday Editions of Daily Newspapers

Sources of data: 2001–2015: Trunečka (2021); 2017–2023: Own research¹

(Toney, 2014), the future is ‘uncertain’ (Hodgson, 2020). All this is taking place as the internet is growing in importance as the most popular medium for sports journalism (Real, 2006). Although traditional sports journalism is more institutionalized than digital forms and kept its specific position centered around a story, while the digital reporting adopted the journalism-as-process model Moritz (2015), the internet sports sites became more perspective mediums. And not only for the supporters as the immediate sources of results, statistics, or match recaps (Billings, Butterworth & Turman, 2018). But as well as the new job for the writers, even if they initially did not plan to work for online outlets (Kian & Zimmerman, 2012). Moreover, it is not possible to ignore the impact of social media, whether they are considered as new competitor to sports journalists, or the relationships between these actors are more diverse (Nölleke, Grimmer & Horkey, 2016).

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¹ It should be noted that the data from 2001 to 2015 (Trunečka, 2021) was averaged over the whole year, while the data for 2019, 2021, and 2023 (own research) was taken from only part of those years. However, the data for all years was reasonably comparable. Data from a missing year, 2017, was added now in this research using the methodology of that study (Trunečka, 2021).

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