

The events before the event Paratexts, liveness, and the extended presence of sports events

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Abstract

This article demonstrates how the concept of paratexts can be employed in the analysis of unfolding sports events. Drawing on the work of Jonathan Gray and Matt Hills, it reflects on the “extended presence” of sports events across media, space, and time – how meaning is created before, during, and after their apparent conclusion, and how their mediated “centres” appear to move in the process. By way of illustration, it examines a boxing event in early 2023 involving the popular British boxers Chris Eubank Jr. and Liam Smith; however, it focuses on the events before the event – namely, the preceding press conference and weigh-in – and suggests that these “entryway events” were paratextually significant in shaping expectations and attitudes towards the “main event”. The article also demonstrates how sports events feed into wider processes of social inclusion and exclusion, often acting as lightning rods for public discussions of socio-political issues, such as race, class, gender, and (in this case) sexual orientation.

Keywords

Sports events; paratexts; liveness; boxing; homophobia; euphemistic discrimination

Introduction

Sports events can tell us much about sport's symbolic and economic importance and often provide unique opportunities to study such things as journalistic mythmaking, collective identification, and representational othering. Clearly, what constitutes a sports *event* is somewhat open to debate; however, the presence or absence of *media* is fundamental. This is especially true of mega-events, such as the FIFA World Cup and the Olympic Games, which rely on multiple forms of media to provide a shared viewing experience for vast, globally dispersed audiences. Indeed, Horne and Manzenreiter (2006, p. 82) argue that "an unmediated mega-event would be a contradiction in terms". For host nations and cities, such events offer opportunities to manage images and impressions and sometimes to rebrand (Dart, 2016). Even winning "the right" to host a largescale sports event, such as the Olympic Games, can be considered a statement in itself (Rowe, 2012). While new streaming platforms such as DAZN are challenging the still dominant position of television broadcasters (Hutchins et al., 2019), social media platforms are enabling users to network, share, and socialize in new ways, but also contribute to and *shape* coverage of unfolding media events – as suggested by Frandsen, Jerslev, and Mortensen's (2022) concept of "participatory liveness". Such developments present obvious challenges for those attempting to "control" coverage of events, as revealed in Hutchins and Mikosza's (2010) insightful study of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. These authors use the term "counter mediatisation" to describe the circulation of footage, discussion, and commentary that is beyond the control of sports organizations, official broadcasters, and accredited news agencies, and which sometimes offers radically different and much more critical assessments of unfolding events (Hutchins & Mikosza, 2010, p. 284).

If media technologies are deepening and stretching the sports experience for fans and viewers (Boyle & Whannel, 2010), many largescale sports events have in turn deepened and stretched to include pre-events (e.g., stadium openings), post-events (e.g., trophy tours), and even during-events (e.g., half time shows) – all of which remain part of the main event's "orbit" as it were. Frandsen, Jerslev, and Mortensen (2022) argue that these and other factors make the study of media events in the current conjuncture extremely complex and give rise to a number of important questions. One such question is whether media events in the present day have a "centre". These authors suggest that even if it were possible to identify a centre, this "may be moving, changing as the event unfolds and presenting various narrative peaks" (Frandsen et al., p. 5). Frandsen, Jerslev, and Mortensen's suggestion is particularly evident in the case of largescale sports events that use a tournament style format, as this format imposes a hierarchical ordering of events *within* the event. For example, the FIFA World Cup typically lasts several weeks and progresses from rounds or group stages to quarter finals, semi-finals, and eventually the final itself – arguably the centre of the event. The Olympic Games provides another variation on this, as it includes both individual and team sports, each attracting varying levels of media and audience interest. Media events scholars have long recognized variations of this sort and

have highlighted that while such events have a “centring” (or centralizing) tendency, this is never total or complete and always subject to potential disruption (Hepp & Couldry, 2010; Couldry & Hepp, 2018). In this largely conceptual article, I suggest that paratextual study is motivated by similar questions and assumptions and offers a potentially fruitful means of analysing the moving centres of sports events and their “extended presence” across media, space, and time.

Paratextual study is both textual and phenomenological, which is to say that it considers both the content of and relationships between texts as well as their *meanings* for those who produce and consume them. In fact, for Gray, paratextual study is fundamentally “the study of how meaning is created” (2010, p. 26). Just as important – given our particular interest here – paratextual study eschews the search for an imagined centre, directing attention instead to an event’s unfolding temporality – to “paratextual pre-figurations and after-images” (Hills, 2015, p. 21). By way of illustration, I examine a boxing event in early 2023 that involved the popular British boxers Chris Eubank Jr. and Liam Smith. Chris Eubank Jr., who uses the nickname “Next Gen”, is the son of former world champion Chris Eubank and is currently ranked amongst the best middleweight boxers in the world. Liam “Beefy” Smith is also a highly ranked middleweight boxer and former WBO light-middleweight world champion (2015-2016). Smith hails from Liverpool, England, where he and his four brothers (also professional boxers) have a significant support base. As a boxing contest, Eubank Jr. vs. Smith was a great disappointment for many fans, with Smith winning the fight in controversial fashion in the fourth round. However, in this article, it is the *events before the event* that are of primary interest to me. At a press conference two days before the fight, Liam Smith made insinuations about Eubank Jr.’s sexuality. At the weigh-in the following day (another event before the event), Eubank Jr. wore a rainbow-coloured captain’s armband to signal his support for the LGBTQ+ community. Both events generated considerable news coverage and online commentary, and the mediated discourse surrounding them also included the issuing of a statement by the British Boxing Board of Control and a public apology by Sky Sports. In what follows, I analyse these “entryway events” and some of the media content surrounding them and suggest that they were paratextually significant in shaping expectations and attitudes towards the “main event”. This exercise is intended to be theoretically rather than methodologically instructive, and it also demonstrates Frandsen, Jerslev, and Mortensen’s point that the “liveness” of events can result in unexpected and unscripted happenings – and consequently, that “the narrative of media events can suddenly change” (p. 12).

The choice of boxing is not arbitrary. Boxing events differ from other sports events in various ways. For example, unlike other individual sports that use a tournament format (e.g., Wimbledon in the case of tennis, or The US Masters in the case of golf), boxing events are typically staged over a single evening and comprise a “main event” and several “undercards” – although these are preceded by several important pre-events (our primary interest here). Despite these differences, one can argue that the long history of

eventization in the sport has been instructive for other sports. For example, while media hype and build-up have become routine aspects of all sports events, boxing was amongst the first sports to fully utilize and exploit the media for promotional and entertainment purposes. Nowadays, as Woodward (2004, p. 17) suggests, boxing's "most public stories are told at venues like Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas, where vast resources are spent on producing spectacle". However, one can also make the case that boxing contests were amongst the first sporting mega-events. For example, Kimball (2013, p. xiv) describes the fight between heavyweights Jack Johnson and Jim Jeffries on July 4, 1910 – billed the "fight of the century" by the newspapers – as a "full-fledged media circus". Twenty thousand people attended the fight, including 600 reporters. Following Johnson's victory, race riots broke out across the United States, resulting in multiple deaths and generating weeks and months of media coverage. Such developments demonstrate that while sports events occur at particular times and places, they can have lasting legacies and widespread social ramifications and can sometimes act as lightning rods for public discussions of socio-political issues, including race, gender, class, and (in this case) sexual orientation. Indeed, the case of Eubank Jr. vs. Smith highlights how sports events are not separate from, but directly imbricated in, wider processes of social inclusion and exclusion. Despite the growth of women's boxing and sizeable viewership figures for contests involving superstars such as Katie Taylor, Claressa Shields, and Nicola Adams, boxing remains a male-dominated sport, in respect of both athletes and fans. Moreover, as I suggest below, male boxing remains a site of "compulsory heterosexuality" (Bruce, 2008, p. 60), in which non-normative masculinities are marginalized and stigmatized.

The extended presence of sports events

In his seminal work, *Show Sold Separately* (2010), Jonathan Gray describes paratexts as texts that orbit, refer to, and generally promote a primary text, but are *not* the primary text. For example, in the case of a movie, we might include trailers, previews, posters, interviews with actors, film reviews, merchandise, toys, video games, fan fiction, and so on. Gray argues that while often ignored by media scholars, such texts and materials play a crucial *meaning-making* role for audiences in the sense that they shape and guide expectations and interpretations. Paratexts can be official or unofficial, conservative or subversive, industry- or audience-made. While some might reinforce and amplify a text's intended meaning (e.g., a movie poster might buttress expectations that it will be frightening), others might suggest alternative interpretations (e.g., an interview with an actor might suggest an alternative reading of her onscreen character). Gray's (2010) point is that paratexts are not inconsequential things; on the contrary, these orbital materials form the "extended presence" of texts (p. 2) and "fill them with many of the meanings that we associate with them" (p. 6). Indeed, they can sometimes "overtake and subsume their texts" (p. 39) and in time, even "become the text" (p. 46).

Gray describes two varieties of paratext. "Entryway paratexts" attempt to capture the viewer's attention and guide their interpretation while *en route* to a text. As he puts it, entryway paratexts "condition our entrance" to the text (Gray, 2010, p. 25). For example, reading a review on Rotten Tomatoes will invariably shape one's expectations about a movie and might even prove the decisive factor when choosing to watch it (or not). "In medias res paratexts" (derived from the Latin phrase meaning "in the middle of things") are those that we encounter when a text is *already* meaningful to us in some way (which of course is not to suggest that its meaning is *fixed*). Some in medias res paratexts "direct our passage through the text" (Gray, 2010, p. 43). For example, "previously on ..." segments in television serials remind viewers of storylines and characters and signal where the current episode will "pick up" the story. Others will be encountered outside of and sometimes long after consuming the primary text. For example, we might participate in a fan forum, listen to a podcast, or watch a spinoff show such as *Better Call Saul*, which is a spinoff of *Breaking Bad*. Gray's point is that the phenomenological experience of a text – how it is made *meaningful* – does not begin and end with the text itself but occurs before, during, and after. As he puts it, "paratexts start texts", but "they also create them and continue them" (Gray, 2010, p.10).

Matt Hills's work is also relevant here. In a novel approach, Hills (2015) draws insights from both paratextual studies and studies of media events to produce a richly layered analysis of the 50th anniversary of the British television series *Doctor Who* in 2013. Like Gray, his primary interest is in questions of textual *phenomenology* – i.e., what texts mean, and why they are interpreted in the ways they are. Though he draws on paratextual studies and studies of media events, Hills is constructively critical of both. For example, he argues that paratextual studies should not only consider the relations between text and paratext (as Gray does), but also paratext and paratext. For example, publicity materials for a movie, rather than the movie itself, might inspire a fanwork. He further points out that paratexts can sometimes conflict, and that fans are often "keenly aware of interparatextual inconsistencies" (Hills, 2015, p. 13). In respect of the media events literature, he follows Couldry (2003) in eschewing assumptions of an integrative "media centre", arguing instead that researchers should be attentive to the myriad narrative figurations *encircling* an event. For Hills, the unfolding event "is prefigured via audience expectations, and producer-audience interactions, configured via an array of (para)textual materials, and subsequently refigured by audience understandings and further producer-audience exchanges, as well as by forms of cultural recognition (reviews, features and awards)" (2015, p. 25).

Paratextual study, exemplified in the work of Jonathan Gray and Matt Hills, directs the analyst's gaze not to an isolated primary text or event but to its surrounding textuality. A paratext might be a tweet, an advertisement, an Instagram post, a fan video, or any number of things. Indeed, as I suggest below, one sports event and its satellite media content – e.g., a livestreamed boxing weigh-in and the social media activity it gener-

ates – can be analysed in terms of its paratextual relationship with another sports event (e.g., the fight itself). What is paramount in paratextual study therefore is *not* obsessively microscopic readings of individual texts, but rather the guiding assumption that texts are “clusters of meaning” (Gray, 2010, p. 47). Such an assumption permits, even encourages, a softening of binary distinctions between primary/original and secondary/peripheral, while also insisting that all texts are open, contingent, and susceptible to future “re-decoding”. To put it differently, this approach does not assume that meaning-making ends with the viewing of a text, but continues indefinitely. When applied to media events, including sporting ones, this approach suggests an analytical shift away from purely “in-the-moment” interpretations (Hills, 2015, p. 24).

Gray’s and Hills’s work focuses primarily on filmic and televisual paratexts; however, sport is also littered with them. Despite this, Oates and Vogan (2014) argue that sport scholars have generally prioritized “main events” and ignored much of this important secondary content:

Such scholarly preoccupations, however, obscure an important feature of these mediated “main events.” Amid and surrounding them is a variety of related programming that might, at first glance, appear ancillary and unimportant. Pregame packages publicize contests by establishing story lines and predicting their outcomes; interstitial commercial messages allow advertisers and media outlets to promote their brands; and postgame content recaps and commemorates events. (Oates & Vogan, 2014, p. 329)

Like Gray and Hills, Oates and Vogan argue that paratexts can reinforce but also challenge and reconfigure cultural meanings. Of particular relevance here – given our interest in how non-normative masculinities are stigmatised in boxing – is their suggestion that paratexts can perform both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic work and can therefore become “important sites of struggle over the cultural meanings of sport” (Oates & Vogan, 2014, 329).

Thinking paratextually about Eubank Jr. vs. Smith

Professional boxing matches, especially ones involving popular and highly ranked fighters, can take considerable time to organise, schedule, and stage. This is largely due to the number of parties involved (fighters, managers, promoters, event organisers, venue managers, sanctioning bodies, etc.) and the complicated and often protracted negotiations around the fight “purse” and how it is to be split. Nevertheless, once a fight has been agreed and contracts have been signed and officiated, a steady stream of promotion begins, which typically includes press conferences, interviews with fighters and trainers, behind-the-scenes footage of training camps, bio pieces, promotional videos, expert predictions, fighter showreels, and so on. Intermingled with this official promotional content will be a multiplicity of fan- and athlete-produced content, the latter increasingly central

to the media build-up, given that combat sports mostly involve contests between just two individuals. On such occasions, the media will often emphasise the “aggressive hostility” (Hitchcock, 1991, p. 75) between competitors, even when none exists. In fact, Stead (2008, p. 196) argues that interpersonal rivalries are often “invented by the media”. Nonetheless, with the advent of social media, hostile and taunting digital exchanges between fighters have become commonplace and are frequently the subject of news coverage in their own right.

As fight day approaches, two important pre-events – or what might be termed *entryway events* – occur: a final press conference and a weigh-in. The latter is officially required, though historically was carried out behind closed doors. In recent times, the weigh-in has become pivotal in the promotion of fights. Indeed, it has become an event *unto itself*, often attracting thousands of fans, many of whom will not attend the actual fight. Such events cannot simply be regarded as “narrative peaks” in news coverage, as this entirely overlooks their paratextual significance within the extended presence of sports events. As noted above, entryway paratexts construct meaning by setting the stage for texts and by establishing early frames for their interpretation. As Gray (2010, p. 26) suggests, “they shape the reading strategies that we will take with us ‘into’ the text”. Figure 1 charts the extended presence of Eubank Jr. vs. Smith chronologically. Readers should keep in mind that this figure is an analytical device and clearly not exhaustive. Also, importantly, its linear depiction does not adequately reflect the possibility of future rewatching and re-decoding by viewers. Equally, some important aspects of these entryway events and their mediated liveness – for example, the *co-presence* of boxers and audience – are beyond the scope of the present article but warrant further study.

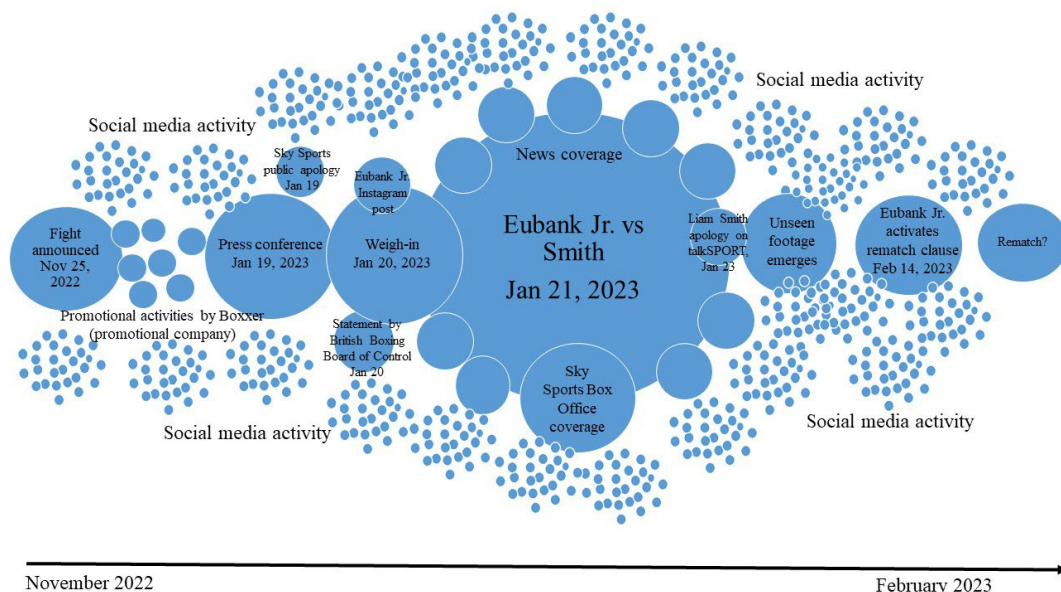


Figure 1. The extended presence of Eubank Jr. vs. Smith chronologically

The final press conference before Eubank Jr. vs. Smith took place on January 19, 2023, and began somewhat conventionally. Both fighters were seated alongside their managers and promoters at opposite ends of a long table facing the press. Their faces and bodies were taut and serious, their physical distance underscoring their mutual animosity. Boxing is a combat sport and as already noted, hostile exchanges, “mind games”, and “trash talk” between fighters – in person and/or via social media – is commonplace. Thus, it is hardly surprising that when fighters are given the opportunity to speak at press conferences, their discourse is often boastful, aggressive, and condescending towards their opponents. However, what was significant about the particular exchange between Smith and Eubank Jr., as I analyze further in the next section, was the wholly unexpected turn it took, with Smith’s allusive remarks shifting the focus from boxing prowess to sexual orientation.

At some point early on in the press conference, Eubank Jr. expressed surprise at discovering that Smith had “slid into” his DMs (direct messages). “I’m used to seeing girls in my DMs”, he said, “I’m not used to seeing guys”. This rather innocuous comment drew an immediate and vitriolic response from Smith:

You go on about girls, has anybody in this room ever seen you with a girl? You got something to tell us? You are thirty-three and you said on the programme you want kids. This is for no laughs I am just asking; do you want to tell us something? You are putting up pictures with Neymar in limousines. No one in this room has seen you with a woman. If you are happy just tell us; it isn’t a dig. You have to have a woman to have a kid. (Glinski, 2023)

A somewhat bemused and nonplussed Eubank Jr. responded that his “private life” was his private life, and that he was “happy and comfortable”. Then he added, cuttingly, that he had heard Smith cheated on his wife and that he would “rather be gay than a cheat” (Glinski, 2023). At the end of the broadcast, Sky Sports presenter Anna Woolhouse apologized to viewers for the fighters’ comments. She said: “We would like to apologise if you have been offended by the offensive language, personal and homophobic remarks made up on stage” (Davies, 2023a). Shortly thereafter, the British Boxing Board of Control publicly stated that it would be reviewing the press conference and the conduct of both fighters.

This press conference generated considerable news coverage and social media activity, and on the following day (January 20, 2023), a weigh-in took place in front of a large gathering of fans and journalists. As noted above, boxing weigh-ins have become events in their own right and often attract enormous crowds. For example, Belleza (2015) notes that 11,500 people, each paying an entry fee of \$10, attended the weigh-in for Floyd Mayweather Jr. vs. Manny Pacquiao in May 2015 – purported to be the biggest crowd ever for a boxing weigh-in. All aspects of a weigh-in are meaningful, from the order in which fighters walk on stage, to the reception each receives from the crowd, to their appearance (muscular, drained, etc.), to their “stare down” and who breaks eye contact first – and of course, their actual *weights*. As Gray (2010, p. 75) suggests, repetitive rituals of

this sort during performative events, much like the playing of a national anthem, work to prepare and excite fans for the upcoming contest. Much of the public interest in weigh-ins as live (and increasingly livestreamed) events also stems from the possibility, perhaps even the hope, that the personal animosity between fighters will become physical. For example, when Mike Tyson and Lennox Lewis met on stage for the weigh-in before their much-anticipated heavyweight bout in 2002, Tyson swung a punch at Lewis. Despite missing, his actions ignited a mass brawl, “with WBC president Jose Sulaiman knocked unconscious and Tyson, in what was becoming his trademark move, biting Lewis’ leg” (William Hill, n.d.). Nothing of this sort occurred at the weigh-in of Eubank Jr. vs. Smith, though a large audience was also present. As another entryway event, it was again the subject of much news and fan commentary. Liam Smith was called onto the stage first, to rapturous applause and cheering. He disrobed, made weight, and smiled broadly at the adoring crowd while flexing his muscles. Eubank Jr. arrived second and was met with some cheering but considerably more booing, which seemed to amuse him. Beneath his sweatshirt, which he promptly removed, he wore a Manchester United jersey and a rainbow-coloured captain’s armband – the latter clearly signalling his support for the LGBTQ+ community. Whether Eubank Jr. is an *actual* fan of Manchester United remains unclear; however, one can assume that the gesture was intended to goad Smith – an avid Liverpool fan. Shortly after appearing onstage, Eubank Jr. posted a picture of the weigh-in on Instagram along with the caption, “We don’t discriminate ... we don’t alienate. We want boxing & sport as a whole, to be all inclusive” (Fenton, 2023).

At the time of writing, there are 572 comments beneath the official Sky Sports YouTube video of the weigh-in between Eubank Jr. and Smith, some of which are implicitly or explicitly homophobic (Sky Sports Boxing, 2023). For example, a post by a user named Truth Matters reads:

Liam Smith went nine rounds with Canelo, one of the best boxers of his generation. Eubank Jr lost to a one armed George Groves after he dislocated his shoulder. Lots of Eubank Tik tok fan boys going to lose their payday loans on this fight and be crying into their strawberry ciders.

Another user – DiggaD27 – posted, “Congrats to Eubank for finally coming out!” Importantly, some of these oblique attacks on Eubank Jr. were posted *after* the fight had actually taken place. For example, a post by a user named 236 reads, “He resembled the colors on his right arm very well in the fight”. Another, named Arthur Ssebuwufu, posted, “Good Eubank was hammered you can’t put on those silly colors and win”. A small number of comments beneath the weigh-in video are pro-Eubank Jr. and pro-LGBTQ+, suggesting that YouTube can facilitate “simultaneous oppression and empowerment” (McCarthy, 2022, p. 364). For example, a post by a user named gasandea66 reads, “Omg, Eubank is so cool. Thank you for supporting the LGBTQ community”. However, it is important to add that one of the replies to this comment – from a user named TheOutlaw – reads, “Get

outta here with that nonsense!" A number of commenters also mention the boxers' physiques, especially Eubank Jr.'s, and one (Lee Howson) references his wearing a Manchester United jersey: "I didn't know that Eubank Jr was a man utd fan. I want him to win now".

As I have already suggested, in foregrounding those communicative moments and textual artefacts circulating *around* a primary text or event, paratextual study directs attention to its extended presence and unfolding temporality. However, this analytical orientation also helps explain "situations where the seemingly central object [...] becomes de-centered" (Consalvo, 2017, p. 178). Eubank Jr. vs. Smith – the "main event" – occurred on the evening of Saturday, January 21, 2023, but as a boxing contest was far from memorable, with Smith winning the bout by technical knockout in the fourth round. The first three rounds were largely uneventful, but in the fourth, Smith landed a barrage of punches on Eubank Jr., one of which – a controversial left hook – caused a significant haematoma beneath his left eye. The referee called the fight to a halt, and as a defeated Eubank Jr. left the ring, he was subjected to homophobic abuse by a spectator who had climbed over the security fence (Biddle, 2023). On Monday, January 23, less than 48 hours after defeating Eubank Jr. in a disappointingly short-lived contest, Liam Smith apologized for his comments at the preceding press conference during an interview on talkSPORT. He said, "I fully regret it", and insisted that he was not "a homophobic man" (Fenton, 2023). On the same day, another paratextual "turn of events" occurred. A boxing (and football) fan using the handle @SpursRumourMill claimed on Twitter (now X) that Liam Smith had illegally used his elbow in knocking out Eubank Jr. (Brookes, 2023). The fan's tweet included a slow-motion video of the alleged foul play to back up his claims – an exemplary case of what is sometimes called "forensic fandom" (Mittell, 2009). This footage ignited a brief furore, with fans and trainers on both sides, as well as boxing analysts and pundits, offering their own opinions as to the validity of the phantom elbow theory. Kalle Sauerland, Eubank Jr.'s promoter, even claimed that he was considering making an official appeal to the British Boxing Board of Control. Again, these developments highlight that the boundaries between texts and paratexts – or what Gray describes as "primary and secondary textuality" (2010, p. 39) – are rather hazy. Equally, they demonstrate Hills's point that the relationships *between* paratexts – including "paratextual conflicts" (2015, p. 29) – can significantly shape meanings around events.

Male boxing as a site of compulsory heterosexuality

In the previous section, I suggested that in deprioritising and decentring "primary" texts and events in favour of an expanded notion of textuality (and temporality), paratextual study can enrich and deepen the study of sports events. However, as Oates and Vogan (2014, p. 331) point out, paratexts and responses to them can also "adjust texts' meanings in *politicized* ways [emphasis added]", such as reinforcing sport's heteronormative boundaries. Researchers have long argued that sport and sport media are not just dominated

by men, but that sport as an institution has historically perpetuated notions of male superiority (Bruce, 2008; Bernstein & Kian, 2013). For Bruce (2008, p. 56), the association between sport and masculinity is “taken for granted”, while for Bryson, sport is an arena “in which masculine hegemony is constructed and reconstructed” (1987, p. 349). Such arguments apply equally to the sports media industry. For example, in *Sidelined: Sports, Culture, and Being a Woman in America* (2022), the American sports journalist Julie DiCaro documents both her own and others’ experiences of male bias, casual misogyny, and sexism in sports media organizations.

Bryson’s words – “constructed and reconstructed” – remind us that discriminatory norms and practices can persist and *evolve* in the face of wider shifts towards diversity and inclusivity, often assuming more *covert* forms. For example, in their revealing study of the attitudes and behaviour of American restaurant personnel towards black diners, Dirks and Rice (2004) describe a range of subtle and intangible discriminatory practices, notably the use of a private discourse of code words for black diners, which includes “Canadians”, “cousins”, “moolies”, and (perhaps surprisingly) “white people”. More recently, in a study of far-right, racist discourse on the Swedish web, Mathilda Åkerlund (2021) traces the increasing use of coded, disguised terms for immigrants, foremost of which is the term “kulturberikare” (“culture enricher”), which she regards as a sneer at political correctness. Åkerlund argues that this term is used in the manner of a “dog whistle” to enable users to “discretely self-identify with an imagined in-group of discontent white ‘Swedes’” (2021, p. 13). Equally, as Zimmer (2012) suggests, the transmutation of overtly racist terms into “everyday words” affords users a degree of “plausible deniability”, though not indemnity. For example, in 2012, a police officer in the United States received condemnation (and a formal dismissal) for referring to a black baseball player as a “Monday”. The meaning of this coded racial slur is somewhat unclear. Regardless, the important point is that slurs disparage not just individuals but entire *groups* of people:

Slurs are powerful, highly taboo, and can cause a lot of harm. The great emotional weight of slurs arises from the power differential between the person using the slur and the person targeted by it. Where such a power differential exists, the person wielding the slur is invoking and re-enacting an entire historical context of violence against the targeted group, (Anderson et al., 2022, p. 42)

The above passage is particularly pertinent to our discussion because high-profile athletes have privileged access to the media generally but especially during sports events, when ill-judged or deliberately prejudicial remarks can cause widespread social harm. As moments of intense, vortextual mediation, sports events can become platforms for social commentary and even vehicles for social inclusion; however, they can also set in motion chains of toxic paratextuality. “Liveness” is an important factor here because it adds a level of unpredictability. As Frandsen, Jerslev, and Mortensen (2022, p. 12) suggest, “it has always been a condition of liveness that things can take an unexpected turn”. As we have seen,

the liveness of sports events can sometimes activate and unearth latent discriminatory attitudes. Liam Smith's comments at the press conference described above were clearly directed at Eubank Jr., but what at first appeared a "particularistic" insult (Anderson et al., 2022) – i.e., one directed at a particular individual – was in fact disparaging of an entire *group* of people. Smith did not use a slur exactly. At no point in the short exchange did he say "gay", "queer", "homosexual", or otherwise, yet his words were loaded with accusatory innuendo. Indeed, the import of his comments – the weight of what was *not* said, at least openly and directly – invokes the phrase "the love that dare not speak its name" from Lord Alfred Douglas's poem "Two Loves" (1894/1990) – a phrase that captures longstanding social attitudes towards homosexuality. "Has anybody in this room ever seen you with a girl?" Smith asked Eubank Jr., his question met with laughter by some members of the press. A moment later, he repeated the same question, only this time using the word "woman" instead of "girl". At the end of their exchange, he commented, "I'm not that type of way, mate, I like women". Smith's remarks call to mind euphemisms around homosexuality – for example, that one might be "going through a phase" – but more importantly, work to stigmatise and marginalise non-normative masculinities.

Above, we noted that although women's boxing has grown in popularity, the sport remains male-dominated, in respect of both athletes and fans. One indication of this is the fact that women's boxing was included for the first time at an Olympic Games only as recently as 2012. Crosson argues that boxing has long been viewed as a vehicle for the construction and expression of "masculine virtues", such as strength and valour, and that boxing films – even those that depict deeply flawed male protagonists (e.g., *Raging Bull*) – are generally "suffused with nostalgia for a strong robust masculinity" (2013, p. 113). Although she argues that boxing is a site of contingent, contradictory, and subversive masculinities, Woodward similarly insists that essentialist and dualistic thinking pervades *constructions* of the sport, with "hegemonic status afforded to heterosexual masculinity and the subordination of other masculinities" (2004, p. 7). In the same vein, Free (2015, p. 1148), drawing on Bruce (2008), argues that a strong correlation between acceptability and "compulsory heterosexuality" persists in this sport. Sometimes, this compulsory heterosexuality is made manifest in instances of flagrant and explicit homophobia. For example, in 2002, during the mass brawl before Mike Tyson vs. Lennox Lewis described above, Tyson infamously threatened to sodomise the journalist, Mark Malinowski: "I'll fuck you till you love me, faggot", Tyson screamed. In 2016, the legendary Filipino boxer Manny Pacquiao caused widespread offence when he suggested on live television in the Philippines that gay people were "worse than animals". "Animals are better", Pacquiao said, "They know how to distinguish male from female" (Murphy, 2016). However, Liam Smith's probing and coded questioning of Eubank Jr.'s sexuality – an instance of what might be termed euphemistic discrimination – also points to the sometimes implicit and covert ways in which compulsory heterosexuality is policed in male boxing. As for Smith person-

ally, we might suggest that his words were an attempt to present “a secure identity of masculinity” (Woodward, 2004, p. 21).

In his initial apology following the spat with Eubank Jr., Smith commented, “If anyone took it personally, I apologise. It was always going to get a little bit heated like that. At the end of the day, it’s just words. Just take it with a pinch of salt” (Davies, 2023b). However, Andi Herring, CEO and co-founder of Liverpool City Region’s Pride Foundation, vehemently dismissed this attempt to downplay the remarks. Herring claimed that Smith’s comments at the press conference were not only offensive but could also have serious repercussions for LGBTQ+ people:

Sportspeople are in a position of influence and responsibility. Even if they believe it to be a throwaway comment, it gives licence to their fans and those who look up to them to do the same. It normalises homophobic abuse and hate speech. (Biddle, 2023)

Similarly, Jon Holmes, Founder of Sports Media LGBTQ+, commented: “You might argue that there wasn’t homophobic words or language used in that press conference. But there was certainly a clear insinuation. You see the spill over of something like that onto social media platforms” (Biddle, 2023). Holmes is quite correct, as a cursory glance at YouTube reveals. Indeed, the comment described above by a user named Truth Matters, which suggested that Eubank Jr.’s fans would be “crying into their strawberry ciders” after the fight, provides another example of euphemistic discrimination. Likewise, comments referencing Brighton – Eubank Jr.’s place of residence and an area with one of the largest and most vibrant LGBTQ+ communities in Britain – can arguably be interpreted the same way. For example, a post by a user named Laurence Pollington, which suggests that Eubank “lives the Brighton life” (Sky Sports Boxing, 2023), is undoubtedly another oblique reference to his supposed homosexuality. While our focus in this article has been on boxing, such sentiments are clearly not limited to this sport. For example, research finds that LGBTQ+ individuals experience routine discrimination and exclusion in sports (Denison et al., 2020; Kavoura & Kokkonen, 2020). Similarly, in their review of extant studies, Hartmann-Tews et al. find that LGBTQ+ individuals, especially gay men, have been marginalised across sporting cultures, with many reporting that they have witnessed homonegative episodes or been subjected to slurs, offensive remarks, and disparaging jokes – discriminatory language that effectively polices expressions of masculinity and reinforces a “heteronormative gender order” (2021, p. 1011).

Concluding remarks

In concluding, we might ask, *do* contemporary sports events *have* centres? On one hand, it can be argued reasonably enough that they do – at least for organizers and promoters. This is particularly true of largescale cyclical events that use a tournament format – a format that imposes a hierarchical ordering of contests, from heats or group stages

to quarter finals, semi-finals, and finals. Journalists too, it might be argued, work under the necessary illusion that there is indeed a centre, as suggested by hyperbolic rhetoric about the “big match”, the “fight of the century”, and so on (my thanks to the anonymous reviewers for this observation). However, as we have seen, the reception of sports events (and their liveness) complicates and undermines easy assumptions about “centres” – or at the very least, obliges us to ask, *for whom* is this the centre? As noted above, media events scholars have long recognized this. For example, Hepp and Couldry (2010) helpfully suggest that while media events are situated and centring, their temporary *thickenings* of media communication are never total or complete and always subject to disruption. Consequently, they argue that analysts must always “research critically the interrelation between the ‘centering’ performances of media events on the one hand and the everyday appropriation of them by audiences and populations on the other” (Hepp & Couldry, 2010, p. 12). I have suggested in this article that such thinking has much in common with paratextual study, which aims to decentre and disaggregate media texts and events and encourages us to explore how they are partly created *outside* of their “supposed borders” (Gray, 2010, p. 81).

It has not been my intention in this article to map *all* the paratextual content orbiting Eubank Jr. vs Smith – a task that would be impossible anyway – nor have I attempted the sort of robust extraction, categorization, and analysis of YouTube comments performed by Brigid McCarthy (2022). Rather, my primary aim has been to demonstrate that paratextual study can assist us in producing more nuanced and contextualised analyses of sports events. Put simply, paratextual study compels us to consider the phenomenology of events as well as their extended textuality and temporality. In Gray’s terms, the press conference and weigh-in described here were “intrinsically part of” (2010, p. 6) Eubank Jr. vs. Smith and much more than mere narrative peaks. These entryway events were “formative encounters” (p. 3); they played “a constitutive role” and were generative of meaning in their own right (p. 173). As Gray suggests, paratextual study compels us to consider reception as well as production, to widen our analytical lens beyond producers, organizers, and official promoters to also consider audience expectations, interpretations, and participation. As such, paratextual study eschews the search for an imagined “centre”, directing attention instead to “surrounding textuality” (Gray, 2010, p. 3) – to “an unfolding temporality that precedes and prefigures the ‘moment’ of an event” (Hills, 2015, p. 20). In this article, we concentrated on the *before* part of this unfolding temporality; however, the *after* part is just as important – as our brief discussion of the phantom elbow theory suggests. Gray argues that public understandings of primary texts are generated across multiple sites by multiple paratexts, but as Scott points out, paratexts do not simply shape understandings of primary texts but also hail or marginalize particular audiences. In this way, we can think of them as serving “a gatekeeping function, greeting certain audiences and deterring others” (2017, p. 142). Here, for example, we considered boxing’s heteronormative gender order and how expressions of masculinity are policed in the sport

– both overtly and covertly. As we have seen, sexism and homophobia are not always explicit. As Oates and Vogan (2014, p. 340) suggest, the hegemonic work that maintains sport as a male domain is sometimes “decidedly slippery”.

On April 18, 2023, the British Boxing Board of Control announced that both Chris Eubank Jr. and Liam Smith had been issued fines for their behaviour at the press conference described here. Alongside this announcement, Smith issued a second apology for his homophobic comments. In an interview with Sky Sports boxing presenter Anna Woolhouse, he said that he “regrets every bit of the fight week”, adding that “the stuff that got said at the press conference should never have been said, in any form of life, never mind at a boxing press conference” (Sky Sports, 2023). Well-meaning as his words may have been, apologies of this sort usually receive minimal media coverage relative to promotional activities and arguably do little to repair the damage caused or to assuage the anxieties of those affected. However, such developments further demonstrate Hills’ point that before, during, and after an event, “a range of different paratextual voices” will be heard – e.g., those of fighters, officiators, fans, non-fans, and others – “generating harmonies in some cases, but clashing discordantly in others” (Hills, 2015, p. 28). An interesting postscript is that Liam Smith has long been a champion for autism awareness. His sister is autistic and he wears the word “autism” on the front of his shorts. This fact did little to ease the backlash he received following his homophobic remarks, but it does remind us that sporting celebrities are complex representational figures and not always predictable or reliable role models.

As a boxing contest, Eubank Jr. vs. Smith was rather a disappointment. The “main event” was not the closely matched contest it was expected to be but a cagey, cumbersome affair that ended prematurely (some would say illegally). In many respects, to paraphrase Consalvo (2017, p. 180), the preceding press conference and weigh-in took “centre stage” while the fight itself was “the supporting actor”. Regardless, Eubank Jr. vs. Smith as an event-text remains *unfinished* – it remains open to future “re-decoding”. In April 2023, it was announced that a rematch would take place, and following two postponements, this eventually occurred on September 2, 2023, with Eubank Jr. securing a “stunning revenge win” (Dennen, 2023). Eubank Jr. vs. Smith II was preceded by its own entryway events and surrounded by its own constellations of orbital materials; however, for viewers of the first fight (the subject of our analysis here), these were encountered “in medias res”. In other words, while it was an event unto itself, Eubank Jr. vs. Smith II was also a *sequel*; it was also an *extension* of the previous event. When considered this way, we can perhaps better understand Gray’s argument that texts are “alive interminably” and that “there is never a point in time at which a text frees itself from the contextualizing powers of paratextuality” (2010, p. 45).

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