Sign away your rights, please

Sports federations want newspapers to pay for covering sport

by Kirsten Sparre

The day when newspaper journalists and photographers will have to pay to get in to cover a sport event may not be far off. This is the prediction of Andrew Moger, head of the Newspaper Publisher Association's digital rights campaign, who tries to preserve traditional rights of newspaper journalists at a time when sport event organisers seek to maximise profits from selling media rights for publication on different platforms.

“In the last four weeks, I have had conversations with three different sports federations who have raised the prospect that newspaper journalists would have to pay for a seat at their events,” Moger said in a session on media and sports rights at Play the Game.

The possibility of having to pay for covering sport events is the latest development in a hard fought battle between sports federations - many of whom have joined the Sports Rights Owners Coalition - and a wide range of news organisations gathered in a group called the News Media Coalition.

At issue is the question whether organisers of sport events in return for access to their events, can make limitations on how news agencies, newspapers and their associated websites cover the event.

Moger argued, on behalf of the newspaper industry, that sports federations' attempts at limiting newspaper coverage of sport events is a democratic problem:

“Independent, critical, objective, challenging journalism delivered by professional journalists is a fundamental element of democracy. Sadly some sports governing bodies show a worrying determination to restrict and create an exclusivity around the flow of news stories and pictures from events of major public interest to the detriment of that public interest.”

Beware the dotted line

Moger provided a long list of examples where sports organisations have asked journalists, photographers and their employers to give up the right to edit material in certain ways, publish when they want, and to hand over their copyright to images and even give sports organisations a share in the profits that the news organisation might make from covering the event.

“We are well and truly being squeezed by the balls and we don’t like it,” Moger said and continued:

“It is about the business of who signs on the dotted line. Largely we have been guilty until now of not realising the full potential and implication when a journalist signs an accreditation form. Wherever there is an organised access point we are confronted by restrictions which we think are unfair and impose an unwarranted restriction on our press freedoms.”

Newspaper organisations, news agencies and their professional organisations have banded together to fight what they consider unreasonable demands from sports federations. In 2006, the group successfully negotiated a deal with FIFA whereby a number of the football’s organisation’s demands for access to covering the World Cup were withdrawn.

Rugby galvanized industry

The most recent focal point was the 2007 Rugby World Cup where organisers tried to limit the number of photos that could be published from the event and also demanded that all photo credit rights were waived to the benefit of the International Rugby Board.

“Rugby has been the turning point for the news media. The voices of news editors, sports editors and journalists have been heard around the world, and rugby has done more than anything else to galvanize opinion of the news media organisations and publishers, big and small. Although you may not have heard of it, hundreds of journalists from different media organisations refused to cover pre-tournament events,” Moger said.

The protest was successful, and the International Rugby Board ended up withdrawing some of its demands just 90 minutes before the World Cup began. But the battle is far from won, Moger believes and quoted the words of AFP’s director, Pierre Louette:

“We need to organise ourselves in preparation for other disputes if we want to be able to cover sports events in an independent and comprehensive fashion in the future.”