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Beyond the baseline: tennis athletes' voice and the future of post-match press conferences

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the ritual of the tennis post-match press conference and considers the impact of new technologies as a way to reimagine its form. We use Gen Z tennis player Naomi Osaka's refusal to meet press conference obligations during the French Open 2021 as a lens through which to consider the consequences for athlete and press voice. Identifying the incident and the fallout as a potential catalyst for change, this article considers the intergenerational tensions between all parties and focusses on Osaka's use of social media to circumvent traditional press obligations and communication. Recent societal events, such as the Covid pandemic, triggered adjustments to press conferences which demonstrated change was possible. Reflecting on such change whilst considering the benefits and complexities presented by social media, this article considers ways in which new and emerging technologies could shift press rituals to reimagine a process which is over 100 years old.

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Introduction: Naomi Osaka and the French Open 2021

Recent research has argued that '[s]ocial media has helped Gen Z athletes find their "authentic voice"' (Mendis et al., 2021). This new media has provided an autonomous opportunity for athletes to articulate their experience.¹ In now deleted postings, Gen Z tennis player Naomi Osaka chose her social media platforms Instagram and X (formerly known as Twitter) to articulate her decision not to participate in press commitments at the French Open in 2021 (Osaka, 26.5.21). Osaka decided to communicate directly with her fans. Osaka explained her intention to opt out of this aspect of the tournament and accept the anticipated fines.² In doing so, she cited the experience of journalistic practice at post-match press conferences including repetitious questioning, previous negative examples of this happening to other athletes (ranging from Venus Williams to former NFL player Marshawn Lynch), and the self-doubt journalists' questions can cause.

This was the first time a tennis athlete made public a planned intention not to participate in press commitments. Reaction to her statement was compounded by her

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method of doing so *via* social media that bypassed the traditional news channels. Osaka's online statement *via* these platforms was ritual-breaking. The stakes were high given the massive growth of sponsorship in professional sports (see Boyle & Haynes, 2009). Tournaments, brand sponsors and their media partners rely on athletes 'playing ball' and participating in their media commitments. Her action and the tournament and media responses emphasise the threat to the economics of the 'interlocking forces of television and sponsorship' (Whannel, 1992: 151 qtd Boyle & Haynes, 2009: 44), as well as other media forms.

The regular engagement in a formalised media format presents a performance of transparency - holding players to account - and is a vehicle for sponsorship visibility. Osaka's individual decision could have major ramifications for other players choosing to do the same and so undermine the media-athlete 'contract' and threaten tournament and press economics. The backlash was swift. Osaka was fined 15,000 dollars for missing her first-round victory press conference (Roland-Garros, 2021). Furthermore, the remaining tennis Grand Slams (Wimbledon, US and Australian Opens) united with the French Open in their threat of escalating fines (Code of Conduct article III T), expulsion from the current tournament and the impact on upcoming Grand Slam appearances including suspension (Code of Conduct article IV A.3).³ In a joint statement outlining their letter to the player, the organisations reflected on '[t]he facilitation of media to a broad array of channels, both traditional and digital' (Grand Slams, 30.5.21). The meeting of these different positions pitched intergenerational voices against one another.

This intergenerational difference was reflected in high-profile, former tennis players' responses. Employed as commentators or pundits and often offering a 'hot take', these former players tended to demonstrate the need for Osaka to demonstrate her professionalism (see, for example, Martina Navratilova's, Chris Evert's, and Boris Becker's responses; see also Bates, 2021). This position is encapsulated in Andrew Castle's reflection that:

I think she has got this completely wrong. I played in 50 countries and lost in every one of them. I hated myself, but there are obligations. You shouldn't sign up for the tour and go and play because it's a part of the written obligations on tour that you speak to the broadcast media (qtd Jones, 2.6.2021).

However, it is clear that Osaka understood the contractual obligations expected of her at the tournament. In her original post she signs off by referring to the 'considerable amount that I [will] get fined for this' (Osaka, 26.5.2021). The fines exist to act as a deterrent, not as a transaction to opt out of an obligation. From a position of economic privilege these fines lack their intended deterrent factor, and caused great concern to the organisers when it became apparent Osaka was not going to play by the rules.

Perhaps the most measured of these early responses was from multiple Grand Slam winning tennis player and social activist, Billie Jean King. A member of the Original 9 who broke away from the established tour to create their own circuit in 1970, King's vision expanded media interest in women's sport and, along with her equality activism, led to the formation of the Women's Tennis Association (1973), equal prize money at the Grand Slams (2007), and the Billie Jean King Finals Cup (2020). King's initial response reflects the importance she places on the symbiotic relationship she has nurtured with the press through such high-profile events as the Battle of the Sexes in 1973:

I fully admire and respect what Naomi is doing with her platform so I am a little torn as I try to learn from both sides of the situation. While it is important that everyone has a right to speak their truth, I have always believed that as professional athletes we have a responsibility to make ourselves available to the media. In our day without the press, nobody would have known who we are or what we thought. There is no question they helped build and grow our sport to what it is today (qtd Elliott, 2021: n.p.).

King's comments allude to the symbiotic relationship between media and professional athletes, sometimes termed a 'Faustian contract' (see Jenkins, 2010); a relationship that she helped to shape in tennis. The athlete-media relationship is one of shifting power dynamics with athletes exposed to investigative questions that may impact on their performance levels or affect the curation of their 'brand', which could have far-reaching economic impacts. Conversely, there is also pressure on journalists to probe losses, gain insight into 'human stories', and provide headlines of interest often focussed within the confines of the post-match press conference, and the need to get a piece to publication to frame a breaking story.

King is acutely aware of the economics of her sport whilst progressing her activism. Her support for the women's tour to relocate its year-ending finals to Saudi Arabia (2025) reflects a huge financial deal that she tempers with the hope that taking women's tennis to the region will provide an opportunity for women, and advance LGTBQ+ causes (following the model of Arthur Ashe's controversial tour to South Africa during Apartheid, 1973). Although Osaka's political engagements mirror King's concerns the methods she employs are different and bear the hallmarks of generational change.

Whilst King is a comfortable verbal communicator who co-opts the press to advance her social causes, Osaka's engagement with the press is different: affected by intersectional dynamics, her introverted nature and experience of anxiety. The significance of Osaka's racial activism is explored in depth in the literature by critics, including Emma Calow (2022), Tom Leppard (2022), McLearn & Nishime (2023), and Mathieu Deflem (2023). Furthermore, Jim Denison and Pirkko Markula show how press conferences fail to privilege the voices of Black athletes and instead can become racialised performances 'directed by Westerners for their own enrichment' (2005: 331). This is intensified for Osaka, who has a complex and intersectional identity. Sabrina Razack and Janelle Joseph note in media descriptions of Osaka the press use up to six different racial identity markers (Razack & Joseph, 2021). As a young Gen Z, female, bi-racial athlete (Haitian-Japanese), she has demonstrated that she is most comfortable in her use of technology for social media expression (ranging from her use of iNote function, Instagram and X). Osaka has commented: 'I'm a child of the internet... the internet has raised me' (qtd Rothenberg, 2024a: 49). Osaka routinely uses social media to engage directly with her fanbase and wider audience. As such, there is a cultural difference in the ways Osaka is speaking to her audience using social media platforms and visual culture. The threat posed by social media to current media practice specifically impacts the spectacle and function of the post-match press conference. Her disruptive act - using social media to circumvent the press - becomes the catalyst for transforming the interface between the journalist and athlete expressed through the post-match press conference. Whilst Osaka's social media post does not form the same purpose as the post-match press conference, it highlights that for some athletes the ritualised form of 'the presser' itself would benefit from transformation. We look to new technologies to trigger a transformation of these athlete-media interactions.

To consider the ways in which the contemporary press conference is being impacted by the emergence of new technologies, this article is structured in three parts. The first part explores the role of the post-match press conference as a ritual for press and athletes alike during sporting events. The second part considers the role of the press conference in light of new communication methods. This begs the question whether an athlete's use of social media could spell a fundamental shift away from the professional journalist towards the emergence of an authentic professional athlete's voice and the resulting impact on sports journalism. In response, part three of this article considers the use of social media and charts the shifting ritual of the press conference. Furthermore, this section outlines new formats such as Zoom press conferences, instigated as a result of the Covid pandemic, and briefly speculates on future innovations possible through emerging technologies such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR). In doing so, we recommend further research to support the players and press.

Therefore, in drawing on current processes presented by the post-match press conference and the opportunities and challenges offered by new technologies, this article concludes with the proposition that the time has come to rethink the press conference in an attempt to capture and represent the authentic voice of the athlete and journalist alike.

Part one: history, ritual, and the unspoken value of the tennis press conference

What is a press conference? Jon Smith and Joanne Butcher remind us that there is 'no precise definition, legally or otherwise, of what constitutes a press conference' (2007: 69). Anyone may call a press conference, in relation to any number of subjects. More commonly, press conferences are pre-arranged events which involve a degree of interaction between a notable individual or organisation and journalists - 'a mixture of speeches and meetings, with a bit of interviewing thrown in' (Smith & Butcher, 2007: 68). They are ritualised events, in the sense that they are performed according to a specific sequence (Denison & Markula, 2005): one or more prominent individuals distribute information, sometimes *via* a pre-prepared statement, then field questions from the journalists present. As such, there is a plurality to the press conference: with multiple participants and hierarchies at play.

The post-match press conference developed as a distinct event in the 1920s, following the enormous growth of newspaper sports coverage between 1880 and 1920 and the establishment of sports journalism as 'a profession with its own norms, values and routines' (Moritz, 2014: 14–15; see also Bradshaw & Minogue, 2019). The growth of radio and television sports broadcasting in the 1930s and 1950s made journalists ever more reliant on this ritual, because it added 'colour' to their writing: '[t]he quote became a critical part of sports journalists' work, a way to differentiate themselves from other media' (Moritz, 2014: 15–16). This direct access to primary sources enables greater personalisation of story, better accuracy and opportunity to add more depth to reporting, especially when deployed in longer-form pieces. For athletes and coaching teams, press conferences are a formal forum to address particular aspects of performance that in turn can help build and curate a personal and/or sponsorship brand (Boyle & Haynes, 2009). The economics of the press conference minimises the cost to press organisations, freelance journalists, and facilitates an efficient use of player and press time.

A nostalgia for more mixed professional and social relations pervades press reflections on earlier press and athlete interactions (see Collins qtd Boyle, 2006; McEnnis, 2022). This reflection has been a key component in maintaining this ritual as well as the concern that the press conference could jettison the sports press altogether. Historically, female athletes have had to struggle for the kind of media recognition granted to their male counterparts (Creedon, 1994; Fink, 2015). Once afforded access, they are in an uncertain position that requires maintenance (King, 2021). These female athletes are accessing a predominately male space. As a young bi-racial, female athlete, Osaka's identity is both radical, intersectional and may be perceived to be 'out of place'. Jonathan Liew sums this position up when he says the press conference is 'a highly visible enterprise that takes place not just in a largely white male space, but a white-male-with-free-food space' (Liew, 2021). Despite good working relationships with journalists, Osaka finds the press conference hugely stressful (BBC, 2021). She has repeatedly reflected on her introverted nature and the impact this has on her experience of the press (see for example Osaka qtd Rothenberg, 2024a: 109, 407). In addition, she represents more than an athlete. As Rothenberg has argued, Osaka is a 'generational touchstone... used to launch into discussions of race, gender, mental health, activism, multiculturalism, politics, business, and generational shifts' (2024a: 14). She has become a focal point for debates about 'woke' mentality with her mental health concerns and vulnerability playing out positively to predominantly fellow Gen Z and emphatic fans.

From the available literature, it is also apparent that journalists at times are subjected to a power imbalance. Karolina Sznycer's examination of tennis interactions demonstrates a variety of responses from athletes which includes interruptions, disagreement and laughter directed at the journalist (Sznycer, 2010: 462–465). The economics of the press conference with increasing athlete prize money and branding sponsorship has fed into this oppositional dynamic (Boyle, 2006). These interactions highlight the often-enormous gap in status and power between multi-millionaire sports stars (at the top end) and the range of journalists present at a press conference, including the precarious free-lance journalist. With the improving financial rewards for professional athletes, fewer are choosing post-sport careers in legacy media.

Whilst the prominent figures at a press conference are the journalists and athletes, it is the press attachés who 'design' press conferences. Tournament logistics include the co-ordination of suitable press rooms, who can attend, and (in a team sport) who faces the media (Bradshaw & Minogue, 2019; Cairns, 2018), leading to concerns regarding the neutrality of these intermediaries and how these interactions will further affect press and athlete interactions (Boyle, 2006). Part of the French Open's response to Osaka's press concerns was to add a press moderator. This role is designated to offer assistance to move journalists on from repetitious questioning (see Mauresmo qtd Mesic, 18.5.22). A key mediator between sports journalists and athletes, the role of the press moderator is ripe for academic research.

The contemporary press conference is typically recorded and may be broadcast and streamed live, and/or shared by news outlets *via* social media. Examples from social media have the potential to transcend the sport with a focus being placed on athlete reactions to geo-political events; with recent examples ranging from Covid vaccination, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and development of the tour in Saudi Arabia (period from 2020 to 2025). The control of an athlete's image and brand leads to high stakes encounters and risk for both the journalist and athlete. The press conference is in part a performance where journalists and athletes are pitched against one another.

The press conference: confrontation, conflict and mitigation

Sports and management psychologist Elsa Kristiansen identifies conflict at the heart of the press conference. Some journalists hype up defeats in ways that dent the confidence of athletes, who, in turn, find participation in press conferences exhausting and stressful (2011: 455-6). Further, Sznycer identifies what she sees as the “adversarial framework”, ‘pitting a player against the press’ (Sznycer, 2010: 460). She argues that this alters the nature of the ritual in a specific way: ‘the task of the interviewee [athlete] is continual face work involving face maintenance after losses and face enhancement in the case of a victory’ (Sznycer, 2010: 460). In other words, there is a distinctive power dynamic at play here whereby the athlete is encouraged to present an idealised version of themselves to the public *via* particular ‘self-presentation’ strategies (Goffman, 1959), while the role of the journalist is to challenge these idealised presentations by asking questions the athlete would rather avoid. These studies reinforce some stereotypical perceptions of journalists. The implication within the existing academic literature is that journalists participate in these rituals in bad faith (see for example Boyle, 2006), seeking to undermine the self-presentation of athletes, providing a human-interest angle for the audience or readership. For this reason, the limited academic literature on sport press conferences has tended to focus on the ways in which the ritual of the press conference impacts on the mental health and/or the performance of elite athletes (Faustin et al., 2022; Kristiansen et al., 2011).

This adversarial positioning extended beyond the press conference as French Tennis Federation President Gilles Moretton’s rebuked Osaka for her stance on the press, saying ‘[i]t is very detrimental to sport, to tennis, to her probably. She hits the game, she hurts tennis’ (qtd Carayol, 2021). Explicit in Moretton’s commentary is the imagery of a tennis match – where player is pitted against the sport. Rather than focus on the metaphor of tennis as play, Moretton stresses the aggression of a tennis match, with the idea of an ultimate victor.

At the time of Osaka’s withdrawal from the French Open in 2021, these post-match press conferences occurred very shortly after the conclusion of play, with players instructed to attend the ‘post-match media conference(s) organised immediately or within thirty (30) minutes after the conclusion of each match’ (Grand Slam Rule Book, 2021: 42). The articulation of the rule was succinct and only makes provision for exemption based on injury or being ‘physically unable to attend’ (Grand Slam Rule Book, 2021: 42).

In 2023 there were significant rewrites to Grand Slam Handbook regarding regulations concerning post-match press media. The updated rule now refers to ‘reasonable grounds’ and extended the timeframe to 60 minutes as being reasonable. The articulation of what is a reasonable standard implies that the 2021 rule (30 minutes) was unreasonable. In the re-written Grand Slam rules, there is an emphasis on direct communication between tournament organisers and the player, and their liaison teams. However, the fines for non-attendance remain the same. There is also a sentence to describe the benefits to the player of doing press including: ‘opportunities enable players to put across their opinions on their performance and provide valuable exposure to the media and fans’ (2023). This meeting with the press gives athletes an opportunity to articulate their experience. Where players have chosen to skip these commitments their absence has become the story (see, for example, Venus Williams following losses at 2015 French Open, where she released a statement to press instead, and Australian Open 2016). Some players are not appreciative of the

opportunity to speak to the press. Osaka posted a video of American football player Marshawn Lynch's press conference on social media during her dispute with the French Open in 2021. As Lynch repeatedly said, he was there 'just so I won't get fined' (Super Bowl Media Day 27th January, 2015).

The attempt to promote the advantages of the post-match press obligations to the athlete suggests the recognition by the Grand Slams that they need to connect with their primary participants and ensure more than mere co-operation. This progress towards support was articulated by the former player and new tournament director Amélie Mauresmo.⁴ In speaking about amendments for the 2022 tournament, Mauresmo cited flexibility and the incorporation of more friendly and dynamic areas to create a more informal space for press/athlete interactions.

Part two: beyond the press conference: social media and the athletes' voice

Social media has proved to be a powerful tool for athletes as a means of circumventing the traditional press. Different platforms have been used to make key announcements and, in some cases, even live-stream press conferences (Bell & Hartman, 2018; Billings, 2013; Bradshaw & Minogue, 2019), thereby sharing athletes' views and thoughts with their audience directly. The positive outcome of this direct relationship has been captured in recent research (Chmait et al., 2020) which has shown that there is a clear link between athletes with social media accounts leading to greater attendance at tournaments. 'Bypassing the more traditional communication channels, these athletes' approach highlights how sports journalism is evolving' (Mendis et al., 2021). Aware of these aspects (Gaber, 2009), media organisations have had to rethink their strategies in light of disintermediation⁵ (Jakubowicz, 2009) 'allowing sports (and other) entities to become content providers and disseminators themselves, bypassing traditional media and reaching out directly to the general public' (Werkers & Katrien, 2010: 215).

Social media posts have become another form of content for sports journalists for professional publication. However, by then, the newsworthiness of these announcements had considerably diminished amongst fans who follow these players closely. This contrasts with pre-social media days when such announcements would most certainly have been broadcast or published first by the traditional media. This clearly affects the sports journalist who has previously benefited from the ways press conference and associated systems had 'helped to routinise and formalise a large part of the flow of information' (Boyle, 2006: 117). That is not the case anymore. In light of these new media and communication technologies, the significance of the press conference, once so crucial as a conduit for information to pass between players and fans, appears to have diminished.

The function of press conferences and social media are significantly different. Social media offers greater control to athletes in terms of engaging with fans, whilst press conferences take place at fixed times, usually post-match, when the athlete is physically and emotionally exhausted. The tone used *via* these fora also differ. Social media, by nature, is informal whereas press conferences tend to be more formal and high-pressured. Post-match press conferences require athletes to articulate difficult thoughts about their performance, fitness and personal lives shortly after competition. Social media is primarily used by athletes for promoting themselves, their sponsors and supporting vital matters such as mental health, race and gender issues. Above all, social media provides a direct link to fans, promoting

interaction, and thereby providing a sense of intimacy. On the other hand, press conferences provide a platform for journalists to directly quote athletes and their communication. Such a format invariably leads to interpretation and at times, adversarial framing, which in turn can have a negative impact on the athletes' mental health (Faustin et al., 2022).

The athletes' voice and media encounters: challenges presented by social media

Whilst social media presents many benefits for athletes as outlined above, it has also proved challenging for the players who are taking on the role of 'citizen journalists' (Bentley, 2011: 107). This can have an impact on the role of the journalist (see Rojas-Torrijos & Nölleke, 2023) and journalistic integrity. As French Tennis Federation President Gilles Moretton reflected on Osaka's withdrawal: 'Everyone will be their own journalist, speak when they want to speak, say what they want to say, respond only to questions that they want to answer' (Moretton, qtd Clarey, 2021). This change in power relations has prompted José Luis Rojas-Torrijos and Daniel Nölleke to consider the 'increasing urgent[cy] for sports journalism to (re) claim professional legitimacy' (Rojas-Torrijos & Nölleke, 2023: n.p.). Unlike social media, press conferences offer an important function in professional sport, particularly in serving the public interest on the one hand, whilst also being held accountable to press standards (Sherwood et al., 2017).

Whilst social media may provide for an apparent freedom of expression, it is often without clear regulation and a stringent code of practice. Consequently, when social media posts go awry, opinions expressed can lead to a severe backlash. Social media is typically experienced by players long before turning professional. For tennis players born since the turn of the millennium, it is the norm to have social media accounts from a young age given that the minimum legal age for joining almost all social media platforms is 13 years (Mendis et al., 2021). The existing policies relating to social media are primarily focussed on safeguarding young players and appear to be limited. However, research shows that there are complexities and pitfalls to joining social media this young, with Catherine Jeffery emphasising the importance of educating young people in the use of these sites (Jeffery, 2023).

Engaging with social media as an adult tennis professional can also draw censor; particularly, where multinational corporations and tournaments are implicated. Eugenie Bouchard had to apologise publicly after suggesting that two tennis players (Dayana Yastremska and Maria Sharapova) were 'dopers' in a now deleted post (Fox Sports, 2023). Novak Djokovic gave early warning to Australian immigration authorities through his Instagram message posted just before boarding the flight to play in the Australian Open 2022, unvaccinated for Coronavirus (Le Grand & Sakkap, 2022). The fall-out from his post was seismic, leading to Djokovic ultimately being deported from Australia.

Whilst it may be beneficial to engage with fans directly using these platforms, an informed approach to its use is absolutely necessary. Without any journalistic editorial code of practice to abide by, interactions and posts on social media have been the cause of shattered reputations and private lives (Agate et al., 2011), the infringement of intellectual property rights (Mendis, 2010), and have led to a plethora of other issues in the past few years (Akhtar, 2012; Antoniou, 2022; Maguire, 2022).

The negative side of social media has been captured by tennis players and support teams – and recognised more recently by the tournament organisers themselves. For example, after losing

to Emma Raducanu at the 2021 US Open (which Raducanu ultimately went on to win), American Shelby Rogers said:

I'm going to have 9 million death threats and whatnot ... I kind of wish social media didn't exist. You could probably go through my profile right now – I'm probably a fat pig and words that I can't say right now (qtd Keating, 2021).

Such online abuse is now a common occurrence in sport, with much of the vitriol generated by gamblers reliant on their online bets (Jacobs, 2023 for later years; Keating, 2021) as highlighted by Caroline Garcia in her post on X following her first-round defeat at the 2024 US Open (Garcia, 2024). In June 2025 the issue of social media abuse by betting participations was articulated by British player Katie Boulter whose in-depth interview with the BBC explored the volume, content and impact on players and their families (Scott, 2025).

These examples are reflective of the pitfalls that social media presents, with an added onus on female participants who face the double duty of the 'athletic labour of femininity' (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). Toxicity on social media disproportionately affects non-white female athletes. The year of Osaka's withdrawal from Roland-Garros, Osaka was the most targeted female tennis player on X with extraordinary levels of negativity with Serena Williams the second most targeted, despite having missed much of the season due to injury (Rothenberg, 2024a: 411). What is clear is that there is no escape from the negative impact emanating from social media, unless a player makes a conscious decision not to open or engage with social media accounts.

Recognising these issues, tennis organisers, particularly the Women's Tennis Association (WTA), have recently taken steps to address the rising levels of online abuse and harassment against players. At present, the WTA is working with social media platforms and *Theseus*, a risk assessment and management company, to filter negative posts, shut down accounts when warranted and inform local authorities, as relevant. In January 2024, there was a more concerted effort by the International Tennis Federation (ITF), WTA, All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club (AELTC) and the US Tennis Association (USTA) using the tool, *Threat Matrix*, to monitor players' public-facing social media for abusive and threatening content on X, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook and TikTok (Wimbledon, 2023).

As such, the tour and tournaments are working with social media platforms to screen players from hate. Whilst there is much information and training for building and managing a player's brand, the training offered by ATP and WTA tours relating to social media as a vehicle for an athlete's voice is insufficient. Where players are wealthy enough to hire PR individuals or teams, their individual voice becomes inauthentic (Henley, 2019). There is a clear indication of the need for more robust social media training that tennis players require from the grassroots stage, around the same time, they would be opening up social media accounts.

Journalists are bound by the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) as well as the Code of Practice as set out in the Grand Slam Rule book, which is further strengthened by a moderator being present at each press conference. Players would also benefit from having some clear guidelines and training to avoid the pitfalls of using these social media platforms. With limited training, it is unsurprising that in a number of scenarios, players have either had to delete posts, apologise for their actions as a result of posts which sometimes pre-date their presence in the spotlight as tennis professionals. It is certainly

paradoxical that organisers promote players' use of social media for the benefit of marketing sponsorship, but gloss over the appropriate training to support the social media policies in place to avoid adverse scenarios and assist players when things go awry.

Part three: 'you are on mute': post-match press conference in the zoom era

There is a symbiotic relationship between journalists and athletes (Li et al., 2022). In what has been labelled the 'sport media commercial complex', modern professional sport depends on commercial revenue, which is heavily linked to levels of media coverage (Fink, 2015). To put it simply, the more media interest, the more lucrative the payday is for the athletes. The purpose of the press conference is not to subject athletes or members of the press to stress (even if this is sometimes an unfortunate byproduct), but to provide a human-interest angle to readers and audiences, and, in turn, to build up the public profile of the athlete and the sport in question. In a study of a press conference called by Maria Sharapova in March 2016, Travis Bell and Karen Hartman demonstrate that Sharapova's strategy of live-streaming the event on her own website was successful in 'fast-track[ing] her push toward image restoration' (2018: 381). This opportunity to manage or look to control the narratives presented to the public by athletes is explored further by Boyle and Haynes (2009). In addition, the televised or streamed content from press conference gives fans an insight into the emotional and physical effort players give in competition. The requirement for players and press to participate in these rituals was highlighted by Andy Murray's post-match Wimbledon press conference (30.06.2018) that conflicted with the France versus Argentina FIFA World Cup match. On hearing the score he suggested 'shall we just go and... [watch the match]?'. As such, the press conference can be a space for player's personalities to come to the fore that in turn can strengthen fan engagement and interest.

Despite the history and often formulaic ritual of the press conference, the form has, at times, been adapted or amended. For example, when the Coronavirus pandemic struck in 2020, a significant shift took place – press conferences, similar to all other meetings across the globe, went virtual. During the pause in live sport, this was a matter of necessity: athletes were forced by lockdowns to stay at home. Then, when live sport resumed, Zoom press conferences were a biosecurity measure and were viewed favourably by the athletes as they were perceived to be less intimidating. Anyone framing their questions aggressively was 'muted' by the press attaché (Livaudais, 2022). H. Godfrey's research into these digital exchanges (2020) notes a number of positive features in the virtual press conference that 'allow[s] for a more diverse group of reporters to feel comfortable doing their jobs' (Godfrey qtd McEnnis, 2022: 89). It also opened up doors to bloggers and freelancers which further 'destabilized traditional sports journalism routines' (Velloso, 2022: n.p.).

Zoom press conferences are not a panacea. Going online simply generated new issues: 'Zoom fatigue' began to set in, the already awkward and stilted in-person press conferences became more apparent on Zoom with journalists talking over each other and both moderators and journalists becoming more aggressive (Livaudais, 2022; see also Velloso, 2022). A stark example in an Osaka conference led to a break called by the press attaché, Catherine Sneddon, to mitigate repetitive questioning that Osaka found aggressive (see Rothenberg, 2024a: 422). Significantly, in this instance, the journalist whose line of questioning was interrupted, Paul Daugherty, kept his camera turned off (Rothenberg, 2024a: 422). As Katie Spellman, a PR professional for tennis tournaments explained:

Press conferences can already be slightly awkward and stilted, but at least you have a moderator in the room who can see the player, who can see the press, who can call on you ... as someone who has run past conferences on Zoom on behalf of the tournament, it's more stressful for that person, it's more stressful for the journalist, and it's more stressful for the player who's being asked the questions.

Tournament organisers felt that Zoom press conferences had become so functional that any fun interaction which a press conference can sometimes present was completely lost (Livaudais, 2022). Also, when the lockdowns eased and vaccines became more prevalent, organisers opened their doors to spectators. However, the number of journalists travelling in person to attend sports press conferences has dwindled. This has been partly due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the ability to work remotely, as well as a response to climate concerns and to manage publishers' costs (Rothenberg, 2024b; Whitaker et al., 2024).

Although press conferences have once again returned to in-person events in relation to tennis, the views of the athletes from the Zoom era lingers— and raises the question of whether a hybrid-model or different uses of technologies could present alternative approaches. The Zoom era demonstrated that the ritual of the press conference is not fixed. It gave an opportunity to reflect on how we might look to further transform the ritual in ways which ensure the well-being of athletes is protected. However, any changes must also take into account the needs of journalists in this symbiotic ritual. A set of guidelines which are fit for purpose in the twenty first century and that involve athletes and journalists working together to mutually recognise each other's needs is required.

A shifting ritual: towards new technologies - What does the future hold?

From social media to Zoom, new ways of communication have demonstrated alternative approaches to the traditional tennis post-match press conference. In looking ahead to the future and in bringing this paper to a conclusion, the authors highlight the existing potential of new technologies such as AR and VR in potentially transforming the post-match press conference. For example, AR can overlay content onto the real world thereby enriching a user's perception of reality viewed through a smart device whilst VR replaces the physical world, by immersing the user in a digital environment, through a head-mounted device (Xiong et al., 2021).

These technologies are already used for sports training, performance analysis and coaching techniques (Cossich et al., 2023). In particular, AR and VR technologies have been used commonly and successfully for bringing fans closer to the action; for athlete training and performance analysis; injury prevention and rehabilitation; data visualisation and analytics; virtual coaching and scouting; and virtual fan experiences and gamification to name a few (Bell, 2025). A further use, relevant to this paper, is reflected through sports broadcasts. In such circumstances, AR and VR technologies are used to enhance sports broadcasts by overlaying graphics, player statistics and replays onto live footage thereby enriching the viewing experience for fans. In 2023, Wimbledon partnered with GiveVision and Vodafone5G to give visually impaired fans the ability to watch live games through VR style headsets by amplifying the footage to suit an individual's specific sight profile (BBC, 2023). It allowed these tennis fans to feel closer to the action as well as to the players. AR and VR technologies also have the potential to increase revenue opportunities for sponsors by bringing elements such as virtual advertisements and information into the live game broadcast

(Technology Innovators, 2025). Moving yet another step into the future, the use of holographic technology in tennis has already been trialled. For example, Vodafone 5G Hologram Coach facilitated a holographic display of Emma Radacanu to coach two grassroots players (Vodafone Press Office, 2023) and Six Kings Slam used this technology for entertainment and engaging fans more closely.

However, whilst these new technologies have great potential and promise for fan engagement, further research is required to establish their viability for wider use by athletes and press organisations. As such, it is prudent to take note of these new technologies and their use in the present context. Emerging technologies are clearly ushering in a new era for sports teams, fans, athletes, broadcasters and sponsors. They are redefining the boundaries of what is possible. It therefore begs the question whether the time has come for all those involved in the post-match press conference to look beyond the current ritual and look ahead to explore an enhanced technological future.

Conclusion

The press conference gives a voice to the athlete and has done so over an extended period of time. It forms part of a professional athlete's contractual obligations during tournaments. Even in the era of social media, the press conference provides exposure to these stories and draws in a more general and wider sporting audience. It is also a prominent site for tournament advertising. As such the press conference provides many advantages. However, as our exploration of the Naomi Osaka incident demonstrates, the press conference as it operates today appears outdated.

It is important to point out that the challenges presented by the post-match press conference go beyond Osaka and have been felt by many other athletes – in tennis and in other sports – such as Venus Williams and former NFL player Marshawn Lynch as mentioned above. When athletes have opted out of the press conference they have typically done so after a loss. The difference with Osaka was that she announced her stance of not attending the post-match conference publicly on social media prior to it taking place. Her standpoint and that of others gives cause for considering the tradition of the press conference.

During the pandemic we saw different ways of working and this was true for athletes and press alike. Whilst Zoom was initially favoured during the pandemic to create a distance between athlete and press, soon a new set of concerns emerged – such as Zoom fatigue, stress relating to speech turn taking, and management of the experience. As lockdowns ceased and the professional tour returned to some sense of normality, the markers of the pandemic press conference disappeared. However, the Zoom era demonstrated how the press conference can be adapted and the manner in which new technologies could be used, even though (within tennis) it was ultimately discarded.

Similarly, the rise of social media has provided a medium for athletes to make their voices heard, which has tended to cover a broad range of thoughts, views and emotions. Yet, as this paper also highlighted, use of social media has not been without its challenges. A lack of clear regulation has meant that athletes have had to deal with online abuse and negativity, especially following losses. Furthermore, use of these platforms from the age of 13 years and upwards has resulted in some athletes having to face up to the consequences of their youthful posts. In addition, a small minority of players have posted misogynistic, racist, and inflammatory content. There is a clear need for key stakeholders overseeing the game

to provide enhanced social media training and put in place robust social media policies. It is encouraging to see the WTA, ITF, AELTC and USTA stepping up to work with social media platforms to address the rising levels of online abuse and harassment of players.

Against the backdrop of these challenges presented by existing social media platforms and technologies such as Zoom, we highlight that this is a pivotal juncture to reimagine the post-match press conference in light of new technologies. Technological adaptations to press conferences during Covid-19 indicated that change was possible, and that transformation could benefit diverse identities. Recent uses of AR, VR and holographic technologies have shown its potential for engaging fans, athletes, broadcasters and sponsors as never before. Is it time to rethink and reimagine how press conferences are run and the manner in which an authentic voice is given to athlete and journalist alike through the use of new technologies? Following on from this article, future research by the authors will explore the experience of stakeholders in the post-match press conference to reimagine and transform a ritual that is over 100 years' old.

Notes

1. It should be noted that this voice can be delegated to paid assistants or family members (such as in the case of Holger Rune's mother, Aneke, who typically runs his social media accounts) or shaped via PR teams or managers.
2. Osaka has claimed her media posts as her own.
3. Unity from the Grand Slams is not guaranteed as there are instances where Grand Slams have acted unilaterally; such as the decision, in response to the Covid pandemic, to move the timing of Roland Garros in 2020 which caused scheduling issues with the Asian hard court 'swing' in the same year.
4. Mauresmo is an interesting figure as tournament director. Whilst her lived experience as a lesbian and a female coach of a male player (Andy Murray, 2024-2016) no doubt informs her decision making she is yet to address some equality issues such as sexist scheduling of day/night matches at Roland Garros (accurate to 2025).
5. Disintermediation is where intermediaries, such as media organisations, are eliminated in view of anyone being able to offer information and other content to be directly accessed by users and receivers.

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