PAPER

**Tom Bradshaw**

# Moral agency in sports journalism: A phenomenological analysis

*This paper examines the ethical issues facing contemporary UK sports journalists through a use of qualitative, phenomenological methods. The sense of moral agency felt by sports journalists is captured through a combination of the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of diaries kept by sports journalists and through autoethnographic logs kept by the researcher. The diaries and logs span the period 2016-2019. The varieties and prevalence of self-censorship, the peripheral relevance of codes of conduct, and the nature of the duties felt by sports journalists emerge as key themes. The analysis of the data challenges traditional pejorative notions of sports journalists being 'cheerleaders' of news organisations' 'toy departments'.*

**Keywords: sports journalism, ethics, interpretative phenomenological analysis, autoethnography, Rugby World Cup**

**Introduction**

Using a combination of qualitative methods, this paper captures the lived professional experience of UK sports journalists with a focus on the ethical issues that arise in the course of their contemporary practice. By using diary-based Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and autoethnography, it identifies ethical challenges experienced by British sports journalists in the course of their professional work in the modern digital media era.

Diaries kept by three journalists are analysed according to the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to provide one data set. Two reflective logs of my own work as a sports journalist provide the basis for autoethnographic data. The first log ran for two-and-half years (2016-2019), with a separate additional log covering my time reporting at the 2019 Rugby World Cup in Japan. I am a sports writer and broadcaster working for a variety of national outlets. The diaries and autoethnography are synthesised to extract key themes.

The diaries are notable for the earnestness with which the participants approach their reflections on duties and ethics more generally, a point that also applies to the autoethnography. This contrasts to historical descriptions of the sports desk being the journalistic 'toy department' (Rowe 2005 and 2007). A sense of duties is a thread that runs through the data, although those duties are multifarious and in some cases individually and collectively incoherent. The data shows the extent to which forms of self-censorship interfere with the flow of sports media information and challenges the relevance of codes of conduct to sports journalism.

**Literature review**

The existing literature around sports journalism ethics contains some penetrating insights into the issues that confront sports journalists in the UK (Boyle 2017), but in some instances texts are either in need of further exploration (Cairns 2018) or slightly dated for a social media era (Boyle 2006a). In particular, while some data has been gathered on the lived experience of being a sports journalist in the digital age (English 2017; Hutchins and Boyle 2017), a vivid and sustained sense of the moral agency involved in being a contemporary sports journalist is missing from the literature. Self-censorship is a topic that has received some attention when applied to journalism generally (Preston 2009; Sturges 2008; Binns 2017), and is indirectly referred to in a number of works on the sports media (Boyle 2006a and 2006b; Hardin, Zhong and Whiteside 2009; Sefiha 2010). But a more explicit and nuanced investigation is required for sports journalism. While some work has been done on codes of conduct as they affect sports journalists (Ramon-Vegas and Rojas-Torrijos 2018), more work is needed into codes as they affect British sports journalists in the wake of the Leveson Inquiry (2012).

**'Huge pressures' on sports journalists**

Andy Cairns, until 2019 the executive editor of Sky Sports News, contends that Leveson's report precipitated a closer scrutiny of media ethics generally, not just of news journalism ethics (Cairns 2018). Against this backdrop, the growth of digital platforms means sports journalists have been having to produce output

  

faster than ever before: 'The pace of news now means journalists are making decisions about what they write, publish and broadcast faster than they've ever done before' (ibid: 7). Moreover, staff cutbacks by many employers means that moral dilemmas are arguably being felt more keenly by modern sports journalists in the digital environment: 'As many newsrooms run with fewer staff it's very often an inexperienced journalist who will have to make that on-the-spot instant decision on their own' (ibid: 8). Cairns adds: 'Rolling news puts huge pressures on journalists and means we rarely have time to stand back and look at the bigger picture' (ibid: 11).

The proliferation of rumour on social media has also changed the caution exercised by traditional sports broadcasters and outlets. Sky Sports News has established a news team whose task, alongside breaking exclusives, is to verify the rumours that originate on social media. Significantly, Sky will now broadcast material that remains unsubstantiated rumour, a situation that Cairns describes as follows:

> The challenge comes when a rumour gathers significant momentum on social media. We can't ignore it so we tell our viewers that this is a rumour we know is gaining traction, that we are checking to verify and that we will update as soon as we can. It's not where we were a few years ago, where we waited to confirm a story before putting it to air, but it's honest with our audience (ibid: 10-11).

Cairns provides a vivid account of how the digital era has prompted changes in sports journalists' working practices, forced a redefinition of who or what mainstream media organisations' rivals are, and stimulated the creation of a fast-paced environment in which considered ethical reasoning is difficult. While providing an insightful and honest individual account, the issues he raises require further exploration.

**Three cheers for the 'toy department'?**

Debates around the ethics of sports journalism are arguably influenced by historically pejorative descriptions of sports journalists which have implied that their activities are in some sense trivial. The description of the sports desk being the 'toy department' of the news media was used in the obituary of the mid-20th century American sports columnist, Jimmy Cannon (Anderson 1973) and has been widely considered since then (Boyle 2006b; Bradshaw and Minogue 2020; McEnnis 2018; Hardin, Zhong and Whiteside 2009; Humphries 2003; Morrison 2014). One way of considering the legitimacy or otherwise of the 'toy department' tag is to consider the extent to which sports journalists have 'compromised their own occupational standing by failing to discharge their "fourth estate" duties of independence, inquiry and, where necessary, sustained critique' (Boyle, Rowe and Whannel 2010: 247). Similarly, rather than fulfilling a serious, public service function that holds the powerful in sport to account and probes the deeper issues of sport, Rowe (2004) has accused sports journalists of being 'cheerleaders'. He frames the debate by invoking the distinction between the cheerleading and crusading journalist. While the crusader carries out investigative work and is not perpetually on the merry-go-round of match previews and reports, the cheerleader fulfils the more superficial function of 'describing sports events and passing on news about them rather than interrogating and probing their subject with vigour' (ibid: 51). However, through a combination of interviews with sports journalists and a content analysis of their work, English argues that critical content outweighs cheerleading content (2017).

In autobiographical works, sports journalists have reflected on their working practices and their place in the newsroom (Hughes 2005; Humphries 2003; Walsh 2012). Humphries suggests that sports journalists operate on the periphery of the journalistic profession and suggests that professional recognition for a sports journalist is directly connected to their willingness to make a stand or, as he phrases it, pick a fight:

> I don't really believe that sports columnists should be in the business of picking fights. We just shouldn't be in the business of avoiding them either. There are not many worthwhile stands to be taken in sport, but drugs is one of them and if I ever want to draw a line that divides this job into the people I respect and those I don't, then the stance that any writer takes on drugs does just fine (Humphries 2003: 90).

It may plausibly be supposed that the 'fights' picked depend on the nature and influence of codes of conduct. Journalistic codes are usually perceived as operating from deontological – that is, duty-based – foundations and, on one view, aim 'to create a collective conscience of a profession' (Keeble 2009: 15). There are two self-regulatory codes for UK news publishers: the Editors' Code of Practice (IPSO 2019),

overseen by the Independent Press Standards Organisation, and IMPRESS's Standards Code (IMPRESS 2017). Broadcasters are governed by the Broadcasting Code (Ofcom 2019), with the BBC having its Editorial Guidelines (BBC n.d.) A bespoke, internationally-applicable code of conduct for sports journalism has been proposed (Ramon-Vegas and Rojas-Torrijos 2018). However, it has been argued that journalistic codes are inadequate by themselves in terms of stimulating ethical behaviour or in limiting and preventing unethical behaviour and need to be augmented by a wider engagement by journalists in matters of ethics as they apply to the industry (Cairns op cit; Luckhurst and Phippen 2014). The sense in which codes impact on the daily practice of sports journalists is in need of further explication.

While questions of self-censorship lurk in a number of writings about sports journalism the phenomenon is rarely named. Andrews contends that 'sports journalists should always take care not to offend the sensibilities of others' (Andrews 2014: 85) but gives no argument as to why sports journalists should tread so careful a line. Boyle also touches on it, arguing: 'Too many journalists and former sports people abdicate their responsibility to report honestly because they may upset important people or damage their own career trajectory' (Boyle 2006b). Similarly, in an analysis of whether former retired athletes make good sports journalists, a former BBC Sport editor suggests that the introduction of ex-professionals into the media has fostered a culture of self-censorship, with former players talking in platitudes for fear of upsetting clubs with whom they have had a professional connection (Bose 2012). The sense in which self-censorship affects sports journalists' practice is in need of more inquiry.

**Methodology**

A methodological synthesis of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and autoethnography (AE) is intended to enable the project to deliver fresh insights into the ethical issues facing sports journalists in the UK and deliver a vivid sense of the lived experience of those sports journalists. A fusion between IPA and AE is a form of what IPA researchers Smith, Flowers and Larkin term the forging of 'fertile theoretical connections [by IPA] with other qualitative approaches' (2012: 186). The research's phenomenological emphasis means it is idiographic – having a strong focus on the particular – so generalisations can only be made with caveat and tentativeness.

IPA is interpretative in that it involves the researcher performing the *double hermeneutic* of interpreting the participant's interpretation, and it is phenomenological in that participants provide a 'rich, detailed first-person account of their experiences' (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2012: 56). Interpretation is a vital part of IPA. Indeed, one strand of hermeneutics that has influenced IPA, which stems from Schleiermacher, contends that a deep analysis of a text can provide the person doing the interpreting with 'an understanding of the utterer better than he understands himself' (Schleiermacher 1998 [1838]: 266). This is a bold, contentious claim, but one does not have to subscribe to it in order to accept this paper's more modest claim that a synthesis of diary-based IPA, in conjunction with autoethnography, can provide insight into sports journalists' processes of ethical reasoning.

The IPA takes each of the three diaries separately, analyses them in isolation and extracts the key themes from each one. When each diary was submitted, there was an initial line-by-line analysis that identified emergent themes. Notes were made that summarised key themes and the emerging interpretation, resulting in an initial distillation of each. After each case had been written up separately, a second-order, cross-case analysis was carried out that identified common themes and tensions. The benefits of using diaries as a form of data have been highlighted by Hammersley and Atkinson who argue that the diary can 'record data that might not be forthcoming in face-to-face interviews or other data collection encounters' (2007: 127).

The diaries were kept by three sports journalists (anonymised as November, Oscar and Papa) for a minimum of six months. All three were UK-based sports journalists using social and digital media for professional purposes. To capture different shades of sports journalism, one was an editor, another a staff reporter and a third a freelance. All three participants were known to the researcher beforehand. It is worth noting that all three were white males. A female participant was sought but none was willing to commit to the length of time involved in the project. This necessitates a caveat for this paper in that the research provides insight into the moral agency of those from the social group which has historically been most dominant on sports desks (Bradshaw and Minogue 2020).

The rubric for the diaries asked the participants to reflect on ethical issues they encountered

  

during the course of their work and how they negotiated them, with a particular emphasis on self-censorship. Eventually, the participants kept diaries for eight, 10 and 14 months, with the participants given licence to continue keeping their diaries for longer than originally specified if they wished. The 'halo effect' phenomenon, whereby participants potentially provide material that conforms with socially expected or acceptable answers (Hardin, Zhong and Whiteside 2009), was one potential shortcoming of the diary data given that the participants knew me and could potentially seek to in some sense impress me. However, this was mitigated by it being emphasised to participants before they began the diary-keeping that honesty was paramount. Prior explanation of how their data would be anonymised was intended to mitigate a wider instance of the 'halo effect'.

Complementing the IPA methods is the autoethnography in the form of what Ellis and Adams (2014) term a 'personal narrative' in which the author tells stories about their professional life in a first-person account. The extent of AE's inherent subjectivity has led to a questioning of its legitimacy as a method (Coffey 1999). However, AE is not a uniform practice. Rather, it is a term with 'a double sense – referring either to the ethnography of one's own group or to autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest' (Reed-Danahay 1997). The AE in this paper, and the Rugby World Cup log in particular, follows the principles of autophenomenographic 'data immersion' delineated by Allen-Collinson (2012), in which the researcher writes in detail about their own lived experience of a particular process or event. I recorded my experiences covering certain journalistic assignments from an insider's perspective before repeatedly returning to the transcribed accounts as I sought to identify themes. This process of data immersion resulted in a line-by-line analysis of my logs and the emergence of key themes.

The first strand of autoethnography is a two-and-a-half-year log (TAL) kept during my work as a freelance sports journalist from August 2016 to March 2019, in which I reflected on ethical and editorial challenges as they arose. The second log (RWC) is kept during my time covering the Rugby World Cup, in Japan, in October 2019. I have worked as a sports journalist for 12 years with both legacy media companies, including *The Times*, the BBC and the *Guardian*, and 'new' media organisations, such as rugby365.com.

When used to complement IPA, my experience as a sports journalist provides another rich seam of data for analysis. By directing what O'Reilly terms 'the ethnographic lens' on to myself (2012: 130) in the immediate aftermath of journalistic assignments, it yields detailed findings with which the IPA data can be compared, contrasted and synthesised. As with the diaries, the issue of the 'halo effect' could potentially undermine the integrity of the autoethnography, but I was aware of this during the log-keeping, with that reflexivity intended to serve as mitigation. This combination of the first-person (AE) and the third-person (IPA) enables key issues around moral agency and lived experience to be closely examined.



**Findings and analysis**

***Diary One – November***

The diary reveals a consistent sense of the editor being thoughtful and patient, and driven by a keen professional sense of the public interest. The ethical principles of a commitment to accuracy, balance and impartiality infuse the reflections, seemingly reflecting the values that the participant's employer, the BBC, places at the centre of its mission and guidelines, even if its ability to deliver such public service values have been challenged (Mills 2016). As November views it, the corporation's reputation for impartiality and balance is more important than 'chasing cheap headlines' and there is a connected emphasis on taking time over a story rather than rushing to publish.

A defining characteristic of the diary is perhaps caution. In an era when there is frequently a race to be the first to post sports news online, November's reflections appear to underscore the virtue of deliberation. As he states in his final entry:

> This, probably more than any other story, highlighted the importance of taking some time even with a breaking story to think things through and ensuring you're happy with the tone of the content you're producing before hitting publish. In a fast-paced environment where everyone wants to be first, it can be easy to rush content out and then regret it afterwards. But even a couple of minutes' thinking time and the opportunity to cross-check previous stories and editorial guidelines can make all the difference to whether you are happy with your decision as a leader or kick yourself afterwards.

Thoroughness is November's *modus operandi*, and the BBC's code – the Editorial Guidelines – is a component in that thoroughness.

While the idiom used by November is not explicitly deontological, the entries are permeated with a sense of how seriously he takes his professional responsibilities. Could this be a manifestation of the 'halo effect' or a manifestation of serious-minded ethical commitment? Given the consistency and depth, the latter seems more likely.

Caution results in one article not being published out of a fear of defamation. There is a hint of self-censorship here, with November suggesting the story may have been pursued in more detail – and published – had it been about a club from a higher league. Implicit is the idea that, because the club is not towards the top of the football pyramid, the story is not worth taking any risks with and can, therefore, be dropped.

November's emphasis on thoroughness and care causes a flicker of frustration and annoyance at colleagues from BBC Radio when a story based on their reporting turns out to contain an inaccuracy. November, whose usual register is one of calm analysis, is clearly irked: 'How much do you actually trust the copy of others, even within the same organisation? … it may be that we need to consider doing our own further checks around the most high-profile and sensitive stories.'

If trust in colleagues is one dimension to his diary, then trust in social media is another. Social platforms are double-edged for him, as they can be both a source of stories, but also platforms on which verification can be difficult.

***Diary Two – Oscar***

The picture that emerges in the diary is of the complexities involved in reporting in depth on a club covered on a regular basis. Due to the closeness of the relationships developed between himself and the club, Oscar attempts to navigate a route that both keeps the club onside and which generates exclusive stories; in one instance, he refers to this as 'horse trading' with the club. There is a willingness to put certain material into the public domain, even if that may upset contacts, if that is required to ensure the public has a full grasp of important issues affecting the club. The truth in such important stories has to trump the feelings of a contact. However, there is also a clear sense in which Oscar on occasion assists the club when the club is caught off-guard. This, however, is not done at the expense of his own integrity as an independent sports journalist. One instance of this is where he effectively self-embargoes himself when a leading player surprises the club press officer in an interview with Oscar by effectively announcing his departure at the end of the season. By acting 'fairly' with the club, Oscar exhibits behaviour which ensures the club remains positively disposed towards him, and this could help him remain on the inside track. However, such pragmatism does not equate to weak sports journalism as Oscar is aware of the need to flex his independence on some occasions; rather, it illustrates the complexities of covering the same club day in, day out as a beat reporter.

A strong sense of respecting the on-the-record/off-the-record distinction emerges, as well as a sense of anticipating when certain segments are off-the-record. In one instance, this leads to Oscar not naming certain players whom a coach names as having disappointed him during a season ('Although it wasn't explicitly agreed, I sensed this was all off-the-record. I didn't publish any details of that part of our conversation'). This is a form of self-censorship where Oscar voluntarily edits out certain content, even though the coach would have had no cause for complaint if it had been included. When strong, controversial material is given off-the-record, Oscar suggests that he is simultaneously able to respect that yet also convey to readers the gist of the controversy through 'subtle hints'. This is another instance of Oscar negotiating the tightrope of breaking stories but keeping intact a good relationship with the club.

In the diary, Oscar's only references to social media are two instances where he describes how he uses Twitter to contact players directly. It reads as if Twitter 'direct messages' have supplanted phone numbers as the principal way Oscar contacts players. It is noteworthy that Oscar does not consider whether this constitutes an over-familiarity or a slight infringement of a player's privacy.

***Diary Three – Papa***

The thread that emerges in Papa's transcript is of a freelance constantly negotiating the tightrope of preserving his relationships with both the sports desks he works for and the PR departments of the clubs he covers. This is encapsulated by his reflection: 'I felt this achieved sufficient balance to satisfy both … with the focus on the positives in the present with a nod to their previous struggles.' He goes to considerable lengths to keep clubs' media departments happy, suggesting he appreciates just how important it is as a freelance in need of club access to have those positive relationships: 'I sent a copy of the published piece to the club media

  

department afterwards and they were grateful for the publicity and liked the way the story had been addressed, so this felt like a "win, win" situation.' Keeping clubs satisfied appears to be of equal importance – if not more importance – than keeping sports editors satisfied. This goes as far as Papa expressing that he has a 'duty' to contacts at clubs. The intros (opening sentences, in the jargon) to articles are sometimes not as 'hard-hitting' as they could be due to Papa's concerns at keeping clubs' PR departments on side. By admitting to a sense of 'duty' towards his contacts in the PR department at a club, Papa arguably displays a form of journalistic heteronomy – a surrendering of his own independence to the gatekeepers who regulate access to players. This pragmatism is, however, arguably canny and a necessary freelance journalism practice as it keeps sports clubs very much on Papa's side, facilitating his job as a freelance.

For the sake of preserving his often hard-won relationships with sources, Papa takes a firm, non-negotiable line with himself on comments made off-the-record. There is a consistent streak of circumspection in Papa's approach, perhaps surprising given his work for tabloids.

**Synthesis of IPA diaries**

November, Oscar and Papa all make decisions that significantly change the flow of information that is released into the public realm through the application of self-censorship. Papa describes how a 'sense of duty' to a club contact prompts him to tone down the top line of an article that he submits to his desk; Oscar does not publish the names of players a coach tells him have disappointed him, and self-embargoes another angle he gets in order to give the club time to respond; while legal fears prompt November to back away from publication.

A commitment to duty, implicitly or explicitly, emerges as a characteristic contained in all three diaries. November is a sports editor who evinces a strong sense of responsibility in complying with the BBC's Editorial Guidelines and fulfilling the corporation's values. Oscar illustrates a thoroughgoing fair-mindedness in his dealings with contacts but, in one instance, emphasises how he will not let the feelings of a contact inhibit the publication of information that he thinks it is effectively his duty to release to supporters. Papa writes of duty that operates in the other direction: of a 'sense of duty' to a club contact. Oscar's and Papa's duties may pull in opposite directions, but the deontological idiom is shared by both.

All diaries share a sense of being kept by thoughtful, ethically engaged sports journalists who have an appreciation of the responsibilities that come with their respective roles. Their decisions appear to be motivated often through principle, and a sense of careful deliberation is apparent. The trope of 'toy department' sports journalism, so often invoked down the decades, is challenged by many of their considered entries. In their reflections on off-the-record and embargoed information, for example, Oscar and Papa are firm in their adherence to respecting them, while November's diary is infused with a sense of him taking very seriously the BBC's core values, such as accuracy, balance and impartiality.



They are the thoughts of reflective sports journalists who take their job seriously and are attuned to the ethical and editorial complexities that can arise in the course of it, although, as with any IPA, this cannot be generalised and said to apply to the UK sports journalist population at large. The thoughtfulness and deliberation that is illustrated potentially reflects the type of journalists who would agree to be participants in such a study, which requires a substantial commitment of their time and which might naturally appeal to more reflective practitioners. Still, the sample of diary-keepers illustrates that there are exponents of sports journalism who discharge the kind of ethical reasoning that Harcup enjoins journalists generally to show: '… to be reflective practitioners, engaged in a constant process of reflection and learning while doing their job' (Harcup 2007: 144).

There is a marked difference between November's attitude to codes and Oscar's and Papa's. The presence and relevance of the BBC Editorial Guidelines to November's practice is apparent, while neither Oscar nor Papa refer to a code during the course of their entries. This could be because (unlike November) they did not have any particularly testing ethical issues to negotiate during the course of their participation that required reference to the Editors' Code of Practice, or it could be that codes simply do not register on their radar during daily practice. Yet Oscar and Papa still make nuanced ethical and editorial judgements despite not mentioning codes. This suggests the inadequacy of regulation in and of itself to stimulate ethical behaviour (Cairns 2018; Luckhurst and Phippen 2014). Indeed, it could be tentatively suggested on the basis of their two diaries that not only is a code of practice not a sufficient condition for ethical behaviour by sports journalists, it is not a necessary condition.

Social media occurs in the reflections of November and Oscar but for different reasons. It is a double-edged newsgathering mechanism for November – rather as it is for Cairns (2018) – and a means of contacting players for Oscar. The absence of social media in Papa's entries is striking given its presence in the other diaries and by the widespread acknowledgement in the literature of social media's pervasiveness in the new digital media paradigm (English 2016).

**Autoethnography**

Self-censorship is a key strand running through the logs, and I am struck at how closely self-censorship is connected in my log to my reflections on my relationships with my sources – a theme that had been articulated to some extent by Sefiha (2010). For example, I debate with myself whether non-professional, social media relationships with contacts (e.g. being 'friends' with them on Facebook) could trigger self-censorship in the future, due to my virtual friendship inhibiting the way I report on the contact's club. I capture my sense of unease: 'This issue reflects the grey area between the professional and the personal that the digital era with its multi-purpose social media platforms throws up' (TAL). Relatedly, I explore how friendships with people close to the sport I am covering can pose moral dilemmas about whether to publish or not publish. I capture the self-censorship issue – but also another dilemma – as I describe a situation in which I was made aware of a Premiership player's career-ending injury through a mutual friend two weeks before an announcement by the club, but how I held off publishing anything about it (TAL). The dynamics of self-censorship are complex, and can function at the interface of the professional and the personal.

In my logs I develop the idea of self-censorship through euphemism, being used for the sake of preserving contacts (TAL). I capture, too, my sense of using euphemism in match reporting, where I describe how I diluted my initial 'brutal' assessment of a player's performance: 'I was still voicing my view, just in a moderated fashion. Neither cheerleader nor assassin, I was somewhere in-between' (RWC).

Echoing Sugden and Tomlinson (2007) and Boyle (2006a and 2006b), I am preoccupied at times in my logs with whether I am too close to my subjects to be able to report successfully, as when I consider the issues arising from participating in a social five-a-side football match arranged by a national side's management team (RWC).

The flow of information from interviewee to interviewer to media platform is not always a pure one, as an entry from August 2018 encapsulates. It is worth inserting in full, as it conveys the complexities in truth-telling that can arise from a standard press opportunity:

> [a player] whom I had got to know well over the course of the past decade, spoke to me immediately after I had turned off the microphone to give me – unrequested – a number of less than complimentary opinions about how his former club, … , was being run. In particular, he referred to how non-disclosure agreements were being used to prevent players and coaches from being able to speak out after they had been sacked – or 'released early' – from their contracts. This contrasted with the relatively middle-of-the-road, inoffensive comments he had made during the on-the-record interview about how he was looking forward to returning to his former club for the second game of the season. In particular, … referred to how one … player, a former captain, had been, in his opinion, poorly treated. The player had been released from his contract a number of weeks earlier, said … but the club had still not announced it. …'s comments were clearly made to me off-the-record and in confidence, but they raised two issues. Firstly, they contrasted in both content and tone to the answers he had given when the microphone was running, and, secondly, they were clearly remarks of public interest (season ticket holders at …, for example, could make a strong case that they should be privy to such information when they pay substantial amounts of money each season to help finance the club) that I was now in possession of – what should I do with them? Publishing them would have felt like a breach of trust to …, and I did not – and would not – reveal them in a story. But what about me perpetrating a breach of trust to the club's supporters, who look at titles I work for and have worked for as a source of reliable information about their club? A conclusion that is not too hard to draw is that much of the content in sports journalism is something of a charade: a player delivers an on-the-record interview at a media day and doesn't deliver the whole truth; a journalist, who is then taken into the player's confidence following the interview, then respects the player's confidence and doesn't touch the subject that has been revealed off-the-record – or at least not immediately. It is like another form of non-disclosure agreement. It is not encapsulated in a series of clauses

  

> in a legal document, but is an unspoken and unwritten rule that is the backdrop to the interaction between journalist and player. It feels like a type of systemic form of informal censorship, and it can be dispiriting to think about, as it can feel duplicitous to the audience and rather like I'm staying on the surface of things (TAL).

Another instance of quotes not necessarily being what they seem is a journalist admitting to me that he had made up quotes with the express approval of two international sportsmen. This was at their request so they did not have to put time aside to be interviewed: 'The journalist explained that he had gone along with this, and suggested the arrangement had come in handy when the publication he worked for at the time was short of stories' (RWC). Again, the flow of information from interviewee to interviewer to media platform can be a tainted one.

There are cases in the logs in which the pack of journalists functions as a collective. This struck me during the Rugby World Cup in Japan, where I sensed that – unwittingly – the pack was collectively making corporate news value decisions:

> Following a match, the division of labour among the pack of journalists covering a specific nation was striking. This division primarily focused on the process of the pooling of interview transcriptions and the pack's self-embargoing of articles based on those interviews. The journalists emailed transcriptions of interviews to one another and then verbally – and sometimes in text [message or email] – discussed and agreed on what time each interview piece could be published from. This, traditionally, is to ensure no-one looks silly be being 'beaten' to a story by a rival title, while also keeping the sports desk back home happy by there being a steady supply of items. This practice was particularly marked with this certain group of journalists, who would often make editorial judgements on behalf of the rest of the pack (e.g. 'I've just emailed the quotes from x, if anyone's desperate. It's for Monday-for-Tuesday publication: not before 10pm on Monday'). Editorial judgements around newsworthiness ['if anyone's desperate'] therefore became, in a sense, corporate. The flow of information was thus internally regulated by the pack; it was not self-censorship as such, but there was certainly self-regulation of the flow of information by the pack. The journalistic pack, it seems to me, takes on a significance greater than the sum of its parts, sculpting the flow of future information (RWC).

This, I think, serves as an arresting account of the self-policing and collective decision-making that can occur among sports journalists.

The fragility of my moral autonomy as a freelance emerges strikingly in one instance (TAL). Here, I convey the sense that an editor's insistence that I refer to eye-gouging claims in the course of an on-the-whistle match report – despite not having had a chance to see the footage myself purporting to show gouging – had left me feeling like a 'hack'. I sought to mitigate the sense of being a hired hack by putting the claim lower down the copy than requested, but the experience slightly eroded my sense of autonomous agency. This is an example of ideals coming into contact with the real world of tight deadlines and the desk wanting a hard angle.



One of the most striking features of the AE is how, despite being infused with a sense of ethical concern, there is no explicit mention of specific codes of practice. At one point I make a general reference to codes and write of being wary of reporting in such a way as to potentially intrude into grief, but this is done without a direct mention of a code. This, I feel, reflects my emerging perspective – echoing Cairns (2018) and Luckhurst and Phippen (2014) – that an awareness and understanding of codes is not a sufficient condition for ethical behaviour by sports journalists and, indeed, may not even be a necessary condition.

**Synthesis of the two research methods**

A multiplicity of duties emerges in both sets of data. Duties can be in conflict, although journalists might voice no awareness of such conflicts (e.g. the duty to one's sports desk, and the sense of duty to one's club communications contacts). Notable about the diaries is the depth with which the participants approach their reflections on duties and ethics more generally, a point that also applies to the autoethnography.

The varieties and manifestations of self-censorship are explored in detail in both the IPA diaries and AE sections, making explicit the self-censorship in sports journalism hinted at in earlier research (Boyle 2006b; Sefiha 2010).

If a code of conduct is a 'collective conscience of a profession' (Keeble 2009: 15), then UK sports journalists appear to lack that collective conscience due to low engagement with codes. November, an editor, is the one participant who is the exception to this. Sports journalists' actions are seemingly informed or regulated more by unwritten rules and, in some instances, 'pack' behaviour than they are by formal codes.

## Conclusion

The phenomenological aspect of the research means it is idiographic, with a strong focus on the particular. This means that any generalisation must be done tentatively. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that the historically pejorative account of sports journalists as 'cheerleaders' belonging to the superficial 'toy department' (Rowe 2005 and 2007) is too simplistic a description. What emerges is a sense of sports journalists' moral agency, with an appreciation of duties a thread that runs through the data, even if formal codes appear of peripheral relevance. Indeed, the findings challenge the idea of a code of practice as a sufficient or necessary condition for ethical judgement and action by sports journalists. They also suggest that ethical earnestness does not preclude the emergence of forms of self-censorship in sports journalists' behaviour. It is hoped that the research will raise awareness, including among sports journalists, of the ways in which self-censorship, often subtly and unwittingly, can influence sports journalists' output.

## References


Allen-Collinson, Jacquelyn (2012) Autoethnography: Situating personal sporting narratives in socio-cultural contexts, Young, K. and Atkinson, M. (eds) *Qualitative research on sport and physical culture,* Bingley, Emerald pp 191-212

Anderson, Dave (1973) Jimmy Cannon, columnist, dies: Sportswriter ranged far afield. *New York Times*, p. 50, 6 December. Available online at https://www.nytimes.com/1973/12/06/archives/jimmy-cannon-columnist-dies-sportswriter-ranged-far-afield-protege.html, accessed on 19 March 2018

Andrews, Phil (2014) *Sports journalism – A practical introduction*, London, Sage

BBC (n.d.) Editorial guidelines. Available online at https://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/guidelines, accessed on 5 April 2020

Binns, Amy (2017) Fair game? Journalists' experiences of online abuse, *Applied Journal of Journalism and Media Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2 pp 183-206

Bose, Mihir (2012) But can medalists write? *British Journalism Review*, Vol. 23, No. 4 pp 8-11

Boyle, Raymond (2006a) *Sports journalism: Context and issues*, London, Sage

Boyle, Raymond (2006b) Running away from the circus, *British Journalism Review*, Vol. 17, No. 3 pp 12-17

Boyle, Raymond (2017) Sports journalism – Changing journalism practice and digital media, *Digital Journalism*, Vol. 5, No. 5 pp 493-495

Boyle, Raymond, Rowe, David and Whannel, Gary (2010) 'Delight in trivial controversy?' Questions for sports journalism, Allan, Stuart (ed.) *The Routledge companion to news and journalism*, Abingdon, Routledge pp 245-255

Bradshaw, Tom and Minogue, Daragh (2020) *Sports journalism – The state of play*, Abingdon, Routledge

Cairns, Andy (2018) Ethical sports journalism – the challenges, *The International Journal of Communication Ethics*, Vol. 15, Nos 1 and 2 pp 7-14

Coffey, Amanda (1999) *The ethnographic self: Fieldwork and the Representation of Identity*, London, Sage

Ellis, Carolyn and Adams, Tony (2014) The purposes, practices, and principles of autoethnographic research, Leavy, Patricia (ed.) *The Oxford handbook of qualitative research*, Oxford, Oxford University Press

English, Peter (2016) Twitter's diffusion in sports journalism: Role models, laggards and followers of the social media innovation, *New Media and Society*, Vol. 18, No. 3 pp 484-501

English, Peter (2017) Cheerleaders or critics? Australian and Indian sports journalists in the contemporary age, *Digital Media*, Vol. 5, No. 5 pp 532-548

Hammersley, Martyn and Atkinson, Paul (2007) *Ethnography: Principles in practice*, London, Routledge

Harcup, Tony (2007) *The ethical journalist*, London, Sage

Hardin, Marie, Zhong, Bu and Whiteside, Erin (2009) Sports coverage: 'Toy department' or public-service journalism? The Relationship between reporters' ethics and attitudes towards the profession, *International Journal of Sport Communication*, No. 2 pp 319-339

Hughes, Simon (2006) *Morning everyone – An Ashes odyssey*, London, Orion

Humphries, Tom (2003) *Laptop dancing and the nanny goat Mambo*, Dublin, Pocket/Townhouse Books

Hutchins, Brett and Boyle, Raymond (2017) A community of practice – Sport journalism, mobile media and institutional change, *Digital Journalism*, Vol. 5, No. 5 pp 496-512

IMPRESS (2017) The IMPRESS Standards Code. Available online at https://www.impress.press/downloads/file/code/the-impress-standards-code.pdf, accessed on 5 April 2020

IPSO (2019) Editors' Code of Practice. Available online at https://www.ipso.co.uk/editors-code-of-practice/, accessed on 5 April 2020

Keeble, Richard (2009) *Ethics for journalists*, Abingdon, Routledge

Kohut, Andrew (2000) Self-censorship: Counting the ways, *Columbia Journalism Review*, Vol. 39, No. 1 pp 41-43

Leveson, Brian (2012) *Leveson Inquiry: An inquiry into the culture, practice and ethics of the press*. Available online at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/leveson-inquiry-report-into-the-culture-practices-and-ethics-of-the-press, accessed on 3 January 2020

Luckhurst, Tim and Phippen, Lesley (2014) Good behaviour can be taught, *British Journalism* Review, Vol. 25, No. 1 pp 56-61

McEnnis, Simon (2018) Toy department within the toy department? Online sports journalists and professional legitimacy, *Journalism*. Available online at https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1464884918797613, accessed on 4 January 2020

Mills, Tom (2016) *The BBC: Myth of a public service*, London, Verso

O'Reilly, Karen (2012) *Ethnographic methods*, Abingdon, Routledge

Preston, Paschal (2009) *Making the news – Journalism and news cultures in Europe*, Abingdon, Routledge

Ramon-Vegas, Xavier and Rojas-Torrijos, Jose-Luis. (2018) Accountable sports journalism – Building up a platform and a new specialised code in the field, *Ethical Space: The International Journal of Communication Ethics*, Vol. 15, Nos 1 and 2 pp 15-28

Reed-Danahay, Deborah (1997) Introduction, Reed-Danahay, Deborah (ed.) *Auto/Ethnography – Rewriting the self and the social*, Oxford, Berg

Rowe, David (2004) *Sport, culture and the media*, Buckingham, Open University Press

Rowe, David (2005) Fourth estate or fan club? Sports journalism engages the popular, Allan, Stuart (ed.) *Journalism: Critical issues*, Maidenhead, Open University Press

Rowe, David (2007) Sports journalism – Still the 'toy department' of the news media?, *Journalism*, Vol. 8, No. 4 pp 384-405

Schleiermacher, Friedrich (1998 [1838]) *Hermeneutics and criticism and other writings*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

Sefiha, Ophir (2010) Now's when we throw him under the bus: Institutional and occupational identities and the coverage of doping in sport, *Sociology of Sport Journal,* Vol. 27, No. 1 pp 200-218


  

Sherwood, Merryn, Nicholson, Matthew and Marjoribanks, Tim (2017) Controlling the message and the medium?, *Digital Journalism*, Vol. 5, No. 5 pp 513-531

Smith, Jonathan, Flowers, Paul and Larkin, Michael (2012) *Interpretative phenomenological analysis – Theory, method and research*, London, Sage

Sturges, Paul (2008) Save police time, beat yourself up: The problem of self-censorship. Available online at http://edoc.hu-berlin.de/conferences/bobcatsss2008/sturges-paul-256/PDF/sturges.pdf, accessed on 3 February 2017

Sugden, John and Tomlinson, Alan (2007) Stories from planet football and sportsworld – Source relations and collusion in sport journalism, *Journalism Practice*, Vol. 1, No. 1 pp 44-61

Walsh, David (2012) *The Program: Seven deadly sins – My pursuit of Lance Armstrong*, London, Simon & Schuster

## Note on the contributor

Dr Tom Bradshaw is an award-winning sports journalist and academic. He is a member of the senior management team at the University of Gloucestershire's School of Media and has written about sport for *The Times, Times Literary Supplement,* the *Guardian/Observer* and the *Independent* in the UK as well as titles in South Africa. He also broadcasts for the BBC. He has published a range of papers and books on media ethics and the sports media, including *Sports journalism: The state of play* (2020). He is joint editor of *Ethical Space*.

## Conflict of interest

The author has not received any funding for the research and/or publication.



  