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Self-censorship and the Pursuit of Truth in Sports Journalism – a case study of David Walsh

*Issues of self-censorship and potential barriers to truth-telling among sports journalists are explored through a case study of David Walsh, the award-winning Sunday Times chief sports writer, who is best known for his investigative work covering cycling. The paper uses a Kantian theoretical perspective to explore how sports journalists, including Walsh, implicitly use deontological and consequentialist modes of moral reasoning when making decisions about newsgathering and publication. Kant's categorical imperative is adapted as the journalistic hypothetical imperative and journalistic categorical imperative are developed as concepts to explore the practical reasoning of sports journalists. Walsh's autobiographical writings about his sports reporting are analysed, together with the body of articles that he has written while a staff reporter at The Sunday Times. The case study is intended to function as a means of identifying and highlighting a range of ethical issues facing contemporary sports journalists, particularly self-censorship.*

Keywords: self-censorship, sports journalism, David Walsh, Immanuel Kant, truth, categorical imperative

“Walsh is the worst journalist I know. There are journalists who are willing to lie, to threaten people and to steal in order to catch me out. All this for a sensational story. Ethics, standards, values, accuracy – these are of no interest to people like Walsh.”

Lance Armstrong, quoted in *De Telegraaf* (Walsh 2012: 260)

“David Walsh led a fight for the very soul of sport. This award is for a man who put his life on hold in search of a truth.”

Sir Matthew Pinsent, presenting the Barclays Lifetime Achievement Award to David Walsh at the 2013 BT Sport Industry Awards (*Sunday Times*, Sport p4, May 5, 2013)

## **Introduction**

This paper analyses the work of award-winning sports journalist David Walsh in order to identify and illuminate central ethical issues facing the contemporary sports journalist. Walsh is an Irish journalist based in the UK best known for his investigative reporting for *The Sunday Times* about the American cyclist Lance Armstrong, whom he suspected of taking performance-enhancing drugs (Fearon, 2012). His 13-year investigation culminated in Armstrong being stripped of all seven of his Tour de France titles for doping, and Walsh receiving national awards for the quality of his journalism (Greenslade, 2014; *Sunday Times*, 2012 & 2013). This case study of Walsh is intended to function as what Yin refers to as an “exploratory phase of an investigation” (Yin, 2009: 6), enabling key ethical issues to emerge that can then be used to inform subsequent research into sports journalism ethics. The study uses a Kantian theoretical perspective in order to identify and explore ethical concepts, tensions and incongruities arising in Walsh’s published work, and as a prism from which to approach sports journalism ethics more generally. It is argued that Walsh’s journalism and reflections on his practice contain a register that is strongly deontological, or duty-based, which contrasts with the more professionally pragmatic approach to journalistic practice that Walsh attributes to a number of colleagues. Kant’s concepts of the hypothetical imperative and the categorical imperative, along with those of the autonomous moral agent and the

heteronomous moral agent, are adapted and deployed as part of an analysis that seeks to make explicit a distinction in sports journalists' contrasting approaches to ethical issues around newsgathering. Boyle's contention that "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, 2006 b) is used to inform the discussion, as does the concomitant question of the extent to which Walsh and other sports journalists self-censor, developing work done by Binns (2017), whose primarily quantitative study found that self-censorship occurs not just among UK news journalists but among sports journalists too.

## **Literature Review**

This case study was undertaken with the issue of self-censorship in sports journalism being among the principal ones that the researcher aimed to explore. Self-censorship is a notion that research into sports journalism has hinted at without making explicit. In his monograph examining issues affecting modern sports journalism practice, Boyle contends that the closeness of the relationship between sports journalists and many of the teams that they cover means they run the risk of producing content that is "complicit" with those organisations' aims (Boyle, 2006 a). Quoting the Irish sports journalist Tom Humphries, Boyle refers to this as the danger of "travelling too close to the circus" and suggests a need for the sports media to "run away from the circus" (Boyle, 2006 b). Rowe has suggested that sports journalists have performed a "cheerleading" function rather than that of "watchdog" (Rowe, 2005 & 2007). The literature has its focus the issue of the relationship between sports journalists and their sources, and implicit within it is that too close a relationship can lead to the journalist's self-imposed muffling of the truth – self-censorship.

Rowe, in considering whether there is substance to the claim that the sports desk is the “toy department” of the newsroom, argues that a closeness of relationship between sports reporter and their subject is symptomatic of the one-dimensional, intellectually impoverished form of journalism that sports journalists provide. He accuses the sports media of:

... an excessively close integration with the sports industry, a lack of critical ambition, and an unimaginative reliance on socially and politically de-contextualized preview, description and retrospection regarding sporting events. When sources are used, they tend to be drawn from the ranks of celebrity athletes, coaches and administrators, thus further isolating the sports desk from the world beyond sport. The key question is, therefore, not whether sports journalism is, indeed, the toy department of the news media, but whether its controllers and practitioners are content to operate within the self-imposed and isolating limits that leave it continually open to professional challenge and even contempt (Rowe, 2007: 400-401).

The allegation of “self-imposed and isolating limits” is a significant one, because it raises both ethical and epistemological questions about sports journalism. If sports journalists are, as Rowe suggests, complacently operating within a narrow world of their own creation, then the question arises over how the truth can be accessed and reported. Furthermore, if the nature of their working practices means they can’t get to ‘the truth’, then it can be reasonable asked how it is that sports journalists can fulfil the first criterion of almost every code of editorial practice, which is to report accurately.

Questions of self-censorship lurk in a number of writings about sports journalism but the phenomenon is rarely named. Andrew contends that “sports journalists should always take care not to offend the sensibilities of others” (2014: 85) but gives no argument as to why sports journalists should tread so careful a line, while Boyle discusses one journalist, Eamon Dunphy’s, refusal to tow what Dunphy terms the “soft consensus”. Boyle adds: “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, 2006 b). 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 is actually fostering 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).

Allegations of sports journalists self-censoring to the detriment of truth have been made from within the industry as well as from without. A former national tabloid editor, who has himself had a questionable relationship with the truth at certain moments in his career (MacKenzie, 2016), alleged in a *Sun* column that “the real bad boys” during Sam Allardyce’s removal as England manager in 2016 following a *Daily Telegraph* expose of questionable behaviour that compromised the coach’s position were sports journalists. Under the headline ‘Sports mafia that’s kept Big Sam’s secrets safe for years’, MacKenzie effectively re-asserted Boyle’s claims of journalistic complicity with the sports stars they are covering, and claimed that too many sports journalists put the enhancement of their own career trajectory ahead of telling the truth and exposing corruption.

David Walsh, the subject of this case study, has principally covered cycling during his career and Sefiha’s (2010) ethnographic study of a US cycling magazine’s coverage of the use of

performance-enhancing drugs (PEDs) is pertinent. The study considers issues of self-censorship without explicitly using the term, instead referring in one instance to reporters “exercising discretion” (Sefiha, 2010: 209). The extent to which exposing PED use can “severely compromise” (Sefiha, 2010: 209) relationships with sources is discussed, and it is suggested that this can cause hesitancy among journalists in publishing the truth. Sefiha highlights the professional dilemma that confronts sports journalists – specifically cycling journalists – in this context: either expose wrongdoing and be ousted from the inner circle so that one can no longer report on the sport effectively on a daily basis from the ‘inside’; or keep quiet about the wrongdoing so that one preserves source relations and is able to report effectively – that is, with access to sources – from the inside on a day-by-day basis (Sefiha, 2010: 209).

While not invoking the consequentialist-deontological dichotomy of moral philosophy that informs this paper, Sefiha indicates that many journalists on the magazine he studied took a consequentialist approach to their fact selection, while simultaneously speaking in the deontological language of obligations and duties. This consequentialist-deontological tension is illustrated by the use of competing phrases, such as “foreseeing the results” of an action on the one hand and talk of “an obligation, regardless of its effects” on the other (Sefiha 2010: 209-210). Sefiha’s study therefore helps inform a useful methodological lens with which to approach this study.

## **Methodology**

This case study takes as its unit of analysis David Walsh's journalism, and the two primary data sets are the articles that Walsh has written while an employee of *The Sunday Times* and the books that he has published while working for that title. It also considers a range of other data, including broadcast interviews that Walsh has given and reviews of his books.

### *Why David Walsh?*

The quotes about Walsh that preface this paper contain abstract nouns which denote values that are central to debates around sports journalism ethics and wider journalistic practice: truth, standards, accuracy. Walsh has stated that while working on the Armstrong investigation, he knew it would be the story that would "define" him as a journalist (*The Sunday Times*, Sport p4, May 5, 2013; BBC, 2017), and it was during his coverage of this story that the ethical dimension of his work became most apparent, as the quotes above from Armstrong (in Walsh, 2012: 260) and the citation for an award read by Pinsent (*The Sunday Times*, May 2013) underscore.

Before deciding on David Walsh as the subject for this case study, the researcher supplemented his pre-existing awareness of Walsh's work with a wider reading of Walsh's output and others' reflections on it. It was during this review of Walsh's corpus of work that his suitability as the subject of a study was established. While lionised in some quarters as an exemplar of the intrepid investigative sports journalist who is unafraid to speak truth to power and hold powerful governing bodies to account (Greenslade 2014), an initial reading of Walsh's autobiographical works as well as the wider secondary literature about his sports journalism revealed a more nuanced and complex picture. As has been seen in the Literature Review, a recurring, negative description of sports journalism in the academic literature is



that of it being the “toy department” of the newsroom, with sports journalists too often fulfilling a “cheerleading” function of the sports they cover (Rowe 2005, 2007) and Walsh – at various stages of his career – has had claims of cheerleading made against him (McKay 2010; BBC 2017). Turning the spotlight on himself, he too has admitted that at certain times in his career he has fulfilled that role, even suppressing certain stories (Walsh 2012), through a process that could be characterised as self-censorship. The Analysis and Discussion section below highlights how these periods of “cheerleading” – acknowledged or alleged – occurred either side of Walsh’s coverage of the Armstrong case, with the ethical trajectory of his career therefore a complex one. It was this element of apparent incongruity that reinforced the initial hunch that he would be an illuminating subject for an exploratory case study.

#### *A Kantian theoretical perspective*

This case study’s exploration of Walsh’s output and journalistic approach is analysed through the perspective of Kantian practical reasoning (Kant 1997, 2005). In his writings on ethics and the formulation of his categorical imperative, Kant invokes the distinction between decisions that are taken as a means of accomplishing something else (instrumental reasoning based on “hypothetical imperatives”), and decisions that are made because the action underpinned by that decision represents an action that is of value in itself. The latter type of reasoning, which manifests itself in the edicts of duty, admits of no exceptions (it is universal and categorical) and the moral agent is obligated to do it (it is imperative). Taking Walsh’s writings and career as its focus, this paper uses a Kantian idiom to conceptually analyse the ethical and practical decisions that sports journalists make in the course of gathering and publishing their stories. In particular, this paper focuses on the tension that arises in Walsh’s writings – and in his own deliberations on other journalists’ actions – between what shall be

termed the *journalistic hypothetical imperative* to maintain access, contacts and thereby the flow of stories, and the *journalistic categorical imperative* to pursue and report the truth regardless of the professional consequences. Through a consideration of this dichotomy, this paper explores the fissure that exists in sports journalism between those whose professional practice is driven by instrumental reasoning and those who adopt a deontological approach. The former are motivated by the aim – or need – to maintain access and contacts for the sake of then being able to fulfil certain journalistic goals (e.g. meeting a deadline, meeting a story quota, satisfying an editor), while the latter place certain duties at the heart of sports journalism and declare, implicitly or explicitly, that those values are inviolable. While this distinction would appear to firmly split journalists into two groups, there is blurring and overlap, with some journalists – at different times in their careers, or even at different times covering the same story – moving from one position of practical reasoning into the other, a phenomenon indicated by Sefiha (2010).

The hypothetical imperative takes the structure of an “If..., then...” (e.g. “If you want to retain good interview access to players at a Premier League club, then agree to the club’s request to have the opportunity to approve copy before it is published”). In such instances, the imperative states the means to achieving the hypothetical end. Kant states that such hypothetical imperatives are always conditional, in that they provide a reason only for the person who desires the end stated in the first part of the imperative, and impose no obligation on anyone whose desires are different to it. The categorical imperative, by contrast, is a form of imperative that is unconditional. Rather than involving the currency of conditional “ifs”, the categorical imperative deals in the currency of unconditional “oughts” (e.g. the categorical speaks in terms of inviolable principles such as “You ought to tell the truth” and “You ought to try and expose wrongdoing”). When deliberating on what the end of my action

ought to be, the categorical imperative states that I as a moral agent am constrained by reason to “act only on that maxim which I can at the same time will as a universal law” (Kant, 2005). So, the Kantian journalist could argue that publishing an article that withheld the truth, or deliberately not pursuing a story despite having some evidence or hunch of wrongdoing, is morally wrong because such decisions, if applied universally (made a “universal law”) would lead to contradiction and the collapse of journalistic communication; they have an illogicality to them that reason resists.

There is another distinction that Kant draws which will be used in this paper as a tool to analyse Walsh’s output and career. This is the distinction between the “autonomous” moral agent – the person who behaves according to the dictates of their independent reason and will – and the “heteronomous” person, whose will is constrained by external forces, such as their individual desires or the aim of satisfying the wishes of a parent or a perceived god-like figure (Kant, *ibid.*).

The autonomy/heteronomy distinction in this case study is used to try to illuminate the different mindsets required by sports journalists when covering ethically contentious stories. Journalism is a deadline-driven industry, and in the digital age it is one that is also driven by the need to hit website story quotas and visitors. The pressure to meet these deadlines and quotas is passed down from an editor, and it could be posited that a reporter who works in these circumstances and feels their pressure – and who adapts their behaviour accordingly – is a reporter who works heteronomously. Such a reporter is likely to feel the pull of the journalistic hypothetical imperative described above.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

## *David Walsh the Kantian*

There are passages in his writings where Walsh displays a distinctly Kantian moral stance. In a Kantian vein, Walsh contends that any attempt to produce sports journalism that does not comply with the imperative of honestly pursuing the truth, regardless of professional cost, is illogical and contradictory. This position is conveyed by Walsh in both his own account of his pursuit of Lance Armstrong (Walsh, 2012), and also in an interview given to the BBC's HARDtalk programme: "As a journalist you're thinking, if this is the greatest fraud, and you believe it's the greatest fraud, you have an absolute responsibility to go after it and reveal him to be a fraud" (BBC, 2017: 3.42-3.51). The key term here is "absolute responsibility"; the sports journalist's unconditional duty is to attempt to expose the truth. It is, for Walsh, a journalistic categorical imperative. In another interview, Walsh expresses it another way by saying he would have felt "a fake" if he had scaled back his investigation of Armstrong for fear of jeopardising interview access (Bailey, 2015).

There are also passages in *Seven Deadly Sins* where Walsh vigorously asserts a form of what could be categorised as Kantian autonomy. He recounts how he dissented from the positions adopted by *The Sunday Times*' sports desk and the newspaper's lawyer over what the newspaper should publish about Armstrong amid their fears of the paper getting sued for libel (Walsh, 2012). This disagreement, and Walsh's reluctance to have his work diluted, reached the point of Walsh tendering his resignation. In this, Walsh displays his resistance to heteronomy; right or wrong is not something that is going to be imposed upon him from without, or something that he will readily accede to as being something that comes from an external will or authority. His moral will is his, and his sense of duty trumps the moral force of claims made upon him from without by others, including senior colleagues at his

employer. However, it is too simple to state that Walsh is a straightforward Kantian and that his entire corpus is underpinned by a deontological morality.

*The “proper journalist” and self-censorship - going with the tide versus resisting the tide*

Going with the tide and resisting the tide is a metaphor that recurs in Walsh’s writings and public pronouncements about his work covering Armstrong. For Walsh, being prepared to resist the currents that provide an easy swim through one’s career is vital, for without such resistance the sports journalist is open to being swept along on the surface, without investigating the eddies deeper down. When Walsh first met and interviewed Armstrong in 1993, the 21-year-old Armstrong’s personality is described as being “like a wave crashing forward and carrying you with him... he had me at his side, and on his side” (Walsh 2012: 2). But resisting the pull of the wave is important, as Walsh described when delivering the 2014 Hugh Cudlipp Lecture. “A good story is always worth pursuing”, he told his audience, and for the sake of the pursuit “it’s ok to swim against the tide” (Greenslade, 2014).

Walsh is frank in acknowledging the sense of warm feeling and good will that can exist between a journalist and those whom they are covering; a feeling that can verge on hero-worship. “The man-crush is a hazard of life for the sportswriter” (Walsh 2012: 2.), he writes, referring both to his initial meeting with Armstrong and his work a decade earlier covering the Irish cyclist Sean Kelly. Reading Walsh’s account of that time covering Kelly, a number of themes emerge: of confessed self-censorship; of Walsh literally riding too close to the circus; and of the blurring power of the sports man-crush. When, in 1982, Walsh covered his first Tour de France, he describes how he travelled with Kelly’s fiancée and her father – so, to continue Boyle’s metaphor (2006b), right at the centre of the circus. And then, two years

later during a Paris to Brussels race, while writing a biography of Kelly, Walsh – while not using the term – produced what, in light of the Armstrong investigation, now appears a dissonant piece of self-censorship that resulted in the public being denied knowledge of Kelly's drug-taking. Inherent in Walsh's account, which merits being stated at some length, is a sense of complicity in a story being swept under the carpet, and a retrospective sense of the absence of integrity and professionalism.

It was time for Kelly to get himself to the start line. He stood up, hopped on his bike... As he did there was the unmistakable sound of pills rattling inside a small plastic container... It should have been a seminal moment. We had inadvertently seen the realities of professional cycling, but we weren't ready for that. I had a biography to write, one in which the hero is a farmer's son from Carrick-on-Suit, a man who as a boy had eaten raw turnips when hungry.... Pills rattling against plastic didn't fit the story. When you're a fan, as I was, you don't ask the hero about the sound that came from his pocket. (Walsh 2012: 16-17)

At the end of the day's racing, Kelly tested positive for the banned drug Stimul and was later fined 1000 Swiss francs and given a one-month suspended sentence. Walsh continued:

When I wrote about the 1984 Paris-Brussels in the biography, I didn't mention the pills in the morning and I tried to make the case that it was hard to believe Kelly had used a substance so easily detectable. I chose to see the ridiculously leniency of the authorities as proof that, at worst, it was a minor infraction. It wasn't how a proper journalist would have reacted. At the time I knew what I was doing (Walsh 2012: 16-18).

In this instance, Walsh self-censored – he prevented the truth from being published and disseminated – and in so doing he produced an instance of the *journalistic hypothetical imperative* mentioned above: that in order to maintain his access and friendship to professional cyclist Sean Kelly, Walsh sidelined values and put pragmatism in their place. This, writes Walsh, was not the behaviour of “a proper journalist”, implying that an authentic journalist would not conceal facts for pragmatic or emotional reasons but would instead behave with more integrity. Self-censorship therefore emerges as a concept right at the centre of a study into the ethics of sports journalism.

The notion of what a “proper” journalist should do is one that infuses *Seven Deadly Sins*. Walsh believes that the adage of holding the powerful to account is one that applies equally to sport as it does to news reporting:

Some of the more thoughtful practitioners of our trade like to say that if you are to be a sportswriter it's better to love the writing more than the sport. I loved the sport. I loved the role that sportswriters could play in sport: afflicting the comfortable, comforting the afflicted, as news reporters used to say. No longer did I see it as our role to smile up at the dais for a press conference, reassuring the organisers and competitors that ‘there aren't nobody here but us chickens’... I didn't want to be a fool just because of my love for sport. And I didn't want to act as an agent in making fools of readers and fans on behalf of the UCI. (2012: 70-71)

In places, Walsh's contempt for those colleagues whom he believes are complicit in “making fools of readers and fans” is vividly expressed. Faced with a choice between nurturing

contacts through the avoidance of posing awkward questions, or jeopardising that access by holding the powerful to account, Walsh's position is clear, and he provides that clarity by means of contrast. The contrast is with John Wilcockson, a journalist for *Velo News* whom Walsh shared a car with on the 1999 Tour. Walsh describes Wilcockson as being on something akin to a professional life-support machine, with the oxygen for his career being supplied by the quotations provided by access to leading athletes:

He couldn't live on this race without access to certain riders; namely the top Americans and Lance. He would do the bread-and-butter job of reporting better the most, but for him the cream came in the team hotel in the evening, when you might snatch a fifteen- or twenty-minute interview with one of your favourites. (Walsh, 2012: 69)

Here, Walsh the unflinching deontologist is most clearly in evidence. He refuses to "act as an agent in making fools of readers" but instead determinedly pursues a line of investigation that derives entirely from his own mission to get to the truth – his is the journalism of autonomy. That autonomy will not be surrendered for the sake of gaining smoother access to athletes or teams. Duty to pursue the underlying truth is placed before professional pragmatism, while for Wilcockson it is the other way around: the need to gain quotes means the need to gain access which means the requirement not to ask difficult questions, even if those are the questions that might lead to the truth.

Walsh's disdain for elements within the media is powerfully conveyed in his recollections of covering the 1999 Tour. The press tent, he writes, is "crammed to dangerous levels with sycophants and time servers", while journalists are part of the "confederacy of cheerleaders"



who protect Armstrong, along with administrators at the sport's governing body, the Union Cycliste Internationale (2012: 88).

An important concept that can be derived from Walsh's reflections on his professional practice is the self-censorship of *questions* as well as the self-censorship of published *statements*. If a journalist censors the type of question he poses, then he is indirectly muzzling the output, too. With Armstrong's 1999 Tour victory, Walsh suggests that journalists self-censored their line of questioning (although he does not use that idiom) out of a misplaced respect for the fact that Armstrong had only overcome testicular cancer two years later. "I think part of the reason they didn't want to ask those questions was because the guy had come back from cancer. For me, that was irrelevant. I just didn't think that should stop us from asking questions" (Pugh, 2012).

#### *Embedded sports journalism – Inside Team Sky*

A key issue in Walsh's career, however, is how compatible his disdain for the "confederacy of cheerleaders" is with him accepting an offer to be embedded with a cycling team; and a cycling team with a stated agenda to portray itself as clean. This is a tension at the heart of Walsh's work, given Walsh's acceptance of an offer to live and travel with Team Sky in 2013.

Both at the time of accepting the invitation from Team Sky's Dave Brailsford and since the publication of his subsequent book, *Inside Team Sky*, Walsh has been accused of opening himself up to claims of "cheerleading" (BBC 2017). The issue can also be expressed in terms of whether in this instance Walsh pursued professional pragmatism – the *journalism*

*hypothetical imperative* – at the expense of detached, journalistic activity that would have enabled the *journalism categorical imperative* of pursuing and publishing the truth to be fulfilled. Moreover, to continue the Kantian idiom, by accepting the opportunity to be ‘embedded’ Walsh was surrendering his autonomy and instead allowing heteronomous factors to influence his journalism and his newsgathering methods. The claim of cheerleading arguably gained greater power when allegations of improper use by Team Sky of the Therapeutic Use Exemption process involving performance-enhancing drugs subsequently emerged, with the claims focused on former lead cyclist Bradley Wiggins. BBC interviewer Stephen Sackur challenged Walsh over this in a vivid manner:

Why oh why, having learned the lessons you did from the Armstrong case, did you decide in more recent years to vouch for in a really significant way the honesty, the integrity, the credibility of the dominant cycling team of recent years, Team Sky, when so many other journalists were saying, ‘Hang on a minute, you can’t be so sure that they’re clean when cycling as a whole is still full of drugs – why did you do that?’  
(BBC 2017, 10:44-11:12)

Critically, in the same interview, Walsh went on to state that – in light of subsequent facts that had emerged over Wiggins’ use of TUEs – he felt he had been “duped” by Brailsford. What is surprising here is arguably not the allegation itself but the fact that the award-winning, ethically-driven journalist who helped bring Lance Armstrong to account is acknowledging that he had allowed himself to be compromised.

Walsh’s decision-making around the *Inside Team Sky* project raise a number of areas for ethical enquiry. One is around whether embedding of this nature is ever ethically justifiable

by a sports journalist, or whether it inherently runs the risk of being tantamount to – or close to – cheerleading or unwitting collusion. The second, more general, area is around the long-standing question about the distance that should ideally exist between sports journalists and the subjects of their reporting. Both in the book and subsequently, Walsh has argued that his time with Team Sky did not involve him breaking his ethical principles, while also conceding – as the “dupe” allegation suggests – that he was to an extent manipulated.

There is evidence that Walsh’s time with Team Sky did not prompt him to go ‘soft’ on the team and its cyclists. The year after he had been embedded with Sky, Walsh published a questioning piece about Froome’s use of an asthma reliever during the Tour of Romandie (Walsh, *Sunday Times*, Sport p18, June 22, 2014), and earlier that month, he also wrote an opinion piece that focused on the tense relationship between Froome and Bradley Wiggins (Walsh, *Sunday Times*, Sport p18, June 8, 2014). In a piece reflecting on Wiggins’ retirement, Walsh uses strong terms when describing Wiggins’ 2012 Tour de France victory. “That victory is tainted, diminished, and when you’re done wrestling with the issues thrown up by his team’s application for therapeutic use exemptions (TUEs) on his behalf, you just want to throw the 2012 Tour de France victory into the bin and wish it had never happened” (Walsh, *Sunday Times*, Sport p16, January 1, 2017).

Walsh states with some confidence in *Inside Team Sky* that his spell within the team has been a fact-finding assignment that has generated conclusions that have been reached through *bona fide* journalism. He states:

In the house of Team Sky I have looked around. I have asked the questions. Done the journalism I came to do. Nobody has given me a secret handshake or password

signifying membership of the Masonic Lodge of Supreme Wizard Murdoch. Nobody has slammed doors in my face. And I have concluded that Chris Froome exists within Team Sky because he is an almost unstoppable force, one of those freak talents which, against all odds, somehow bubbles to the top (2013: 193).

Walsh's decision to accept an invitation to spend time with Team Sky is arguably a case study in its own right about sports journalism ethics, not least given the latest allegations surrounding Froome and asthma medication (Ingle & Kelner, 2017). It has highlighted how the Kantian journalistic duty to pursue and publish the truth is potentially incompatible with the embedding process, despite there being scope for acknowledging that the integrity of Walsh's work was not totally undermined by the embedding. The independence – or autonomy – of sports journalists is a key area posed by Walsh's embedding, with the issue of how best to access 'the truth' another central topic.

## **Conclusion**

This case study of David Walsh has highlighted a number of key areas for further research in the field of sports journalism ethics. Principally, it has highlighted how issues of self-censorship are central to the ethics of sports journalism, and how the integrity of the profession can arguably be measured by the extent to which its practitioners self-censor, whether that be through the self-censoring of *questions* or the self-censoring of *information* that is contained in published material. Walsh's own career has also been shown to be an instructive one to analyse from the perspective of deontology, with his work shifting between

an apparently firm adherence to a duty-based approach to an instance of him potentially surrendering professional autonomy.

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