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Benefit or Burden?: Social media and moral complexities confronting sports journalists

Tom Bradshaw

Introduction

The use of Twitter and other social media platforms is now an established form of sports journalism practice (English, 2016; Sheffer and Schultz, 2010; Sherwood and Nicholson, 2012), although research is ambivalent about how effectively sports journalists deploy new media technologies (Fondevila-Gascon, Rom-Rodriguez and Santana-Lopez, 2016). Social media has also acted as a spur to competition between sports journalists (Gibbs and Haynes, 2013). While the ethical challenges posed to sports journalists by social media have received some attention (Bradshaw and Minogue, 2018) and have prompted some to propose a bespoke code of practice for sports journalists (Ramon-Vegas and Rojas-Torrijos, 2018), they are in need of more detailed explication and analysis through a deeper consideration of sports journalists' experiences of working in the social media era.

This chapter uses qualitative data to explore the ethical issues facing sports journalists in the digital age. The data comprises in-depth interviews with ten sports journalists as well as diaries kept by three different sports journalists. The sample of sports journalists captures both broadcast and online/newspaper journalists. While the journalists who took part in the research are all based in the UK the findings are likely to have resonance for sports journalists operating in any country where social media is prevalent, not least because social media allows journalists to engage with an international audience. The data-collection has been underpinned by a methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flower and Larkin, 2009), according to which the sports journalists were able to reflect in detail on their personal experience of negotiating ethical issues in sports journalism.

Social media emerges as a double-edged sword: in the same breath it can be regarded as an important newsgathering tool but also a platform on which verification is difficult. One of its most positive functions is to raise the standard of some sports journalists' output, but at its worst it can be a platform for grotesque distortion and for corrupting sports journalists' decision-making processes. What emerges is how social media has transformed the practice of sports journalists, and with that has come new ethical issues, or in some instances old ethical issues in new guises.

The findings can be condensed to the following points:

- Online abuse of sports journalists is widespread, and for some participants online abuse—whether at them or to the subjects of their stories—is a quotidian experience
- Perhaps paradoxically, social media is viewed as facilitating the spread of inaccuracies, but is perceived by some as a potent driver of improved standards of accuracy due to sports journalists feeling that their work is under greater scrutiny than ever before
- Social media is seen by some sports journalists as a corrupting influence on the integrity of sports journalism, with large Twitter followings corrupting sports journalists by prompting them to make editorial judgements based on their followers' anticipated reaction
- Social media has led to new—and arguably more complex—forms of self-censorship among sports journalists
- There is a marked ambivalence among participants about the impact of social media on sports journalism and sports journalists
- Alongside new ethical issues arising in the social media era, more long-standing pre-social media issues persist too.

The chapter concludes by making a recommendation to industry. This is based on how commonplace the abuse of sports journalists appears to be. Having a "thick skin" is the standard response for dealing with such abuse, but this seems an inadequate response given the nature and volume of some abuse, and given the need to protect journalists' mental health. As such, sports desks and sports journalism organisations, such as the Sports Journalists' Association in the UK, are recommended to consider drafting guidance and organising forums to support the recipients of online abuse.

Literature Review

Ethical issues confront sports journalists working for local, regional, national and international news organisations (Boyle, 2006a and 2006b; Cairns, 2018; Harcup, 2007). In his classic 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 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, 2006b). Sugden and Tomlinson (2007) also consider the complicity potentially involved in sports journalists' relationships with both their subjects and sources, arguing that a "collusive dynamic" exists, while Rowe (2005, 2007) has suggested that sports journalists have performed a "cheerleading" function rather than that of watchdog. A connected phenomenon—the increasing reliance by journalists on material provided by public relations departments, and the attendant disregard for verification—has been labelled "churnalism" by Davies (2008) and an extreme form of the activity has resulted in at least one sports writer being suspended from their role in the United States (Biasotti, 2015).

It has been suggested that the growth of digital has made issues of self-censorship more prominent for journalists generally, including sports journalists, due to the ease with which social media and other digital platforms enable readers to react directly and immediately to content they dislike or disagree with (Binns, 2017a and 2017b; Steen, 2014: 151-160). This is arguably just one facet of the impact that social media has had on editorial decision-making. The issue of how the increased pace of the sports news cycle has forced reporters to make editorial and ethical decisions more rapidly than in the past has been raised by those in positions of significant editorial power in the sports journalism industry, such as Cairns (2018). Indeed, Andy Cairns, the now former executive editor of Sky Sports News, offers a frank, vivid and thoughtful assessment of the ethical issues facing sports journalism in the digital era, not least with regard to social media. The proliferation of rumour on social media has changed the caution exercised by traditional sports broadcasters and outlets, he argues (Cairns, 2018). Sky will now broadcast material that remains unsubstantiated rumour, a situation 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 (Cairns, 2018, 10-11).

Such a policy represents a shift away from traditional sourcing approaches, but Cairns contends that sports journalists are now far more investigative-minded than previously, and there are, he suggests, strong reasons to believe that the quality of sports journalism is good. However, he argues that this bolder and wider-ranging stance taken by sports journalists raises issues around ethical training:

> Sports journalists now regularly cover issues that shine a light on some of the key ethical questions in broader society. Over the last year sports writers have covered the take a knee debate, stories about race and sex discrimination,

corruption, gambling, drugs, abuse and mental health. The industry needs journalists equipped to handle these questions (Cairns, 2018: 11-12).

Cairns provides a vivid account of how the digital era has prompted changes in sports journalists' working practices and stimulated the creation of a fast-paced environment in which considered ethical reasoning is difficult. Yet while providing an insightful and honest individual account, the issues he raises require further exploration.

As far back as 2010, Sheffer and Schultz were suggesting that the use of Twitter and other new media technologies could be occasioning a "paradigm shift" in sports journalism practice, with traditional journalists losing their privileged position as agenda-setters but also being able to interact more directly with their audience and offer more opinion (Sheffer and Schultz, 2010). However, the growth of social media—while enabling sports journalists to interact with their audiences more than before—has also undermined sports journalists, through the emergence of bogus Twitter accounts purveying misinformation (Corcoran, 2014). It has also stimulated the promotion of clickbait. The growth of so-called "clickbait culture"—in which journalists produce often sensationally-headlined online stories with the aim of attracting a bigger audience—has arisen from media groups' desire to attract higher numbers of visitors to websites (Greenslade, 2016) and thereby facilitate advertising revenue (Rajan, 2018). It has been argued by Cable and Mottershead (2018) that the pursuit of increased audience share through clickbait tactics has compromised quality. In a longitudinal analysis examining the Twitter feeds of 15 major football media outlets between 2010 and 2017, they conclude that quality is being undermined as outlets pursue "a never-ending quest for easy content" in which "attractive headlines trump journalistic content" (Cable and Mottershead, 2018: 69). Producing clickbait content is, they contend, a short-sighted way of attempting to build an audience base that will return to a site. They suggest that sports desks and sports journalists should provide more interaction with the audience rather than more clickbait content, concluding: "If the competition is for eyeballs then surely the way to build a community and audience is to interact and not to churn out unsatisfying yet tasty morsels of clickbait for the audience to gorge themselves on" (Cable and Mottershead, 2018: 78). The issue arises, however, about how dependent the audience has already become on a diet of such morsels, and whether they can be weaned off it (Bradshaw and Minogue, 2018).

Social media is not the only means of audiences "gorging" on questionable sports content. Echoing some of the points raised by Cairns (2018), a qualitative study of sports media communications professionals in Australia found three areas of concern about the quality of sports content in the 24-hour digital era: that accuracy was a casualty of the speed at which sports journalists were seeking to publish stories; that journalists were attempting to produce more content with fewer resources; and that there was an increase in complaints (Edmondson, 2018). Following 26 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with sports communication professionals she concludes that violations of core ethical standards of Australian journalism are happening routinely as a consequence of the digital 24/7 news cycle (Edmondson, 2018: 54). A useful counterbalance to the findings, however, would be provided by interviews with sports journalists, rather than the study's reliance solely on PR professionals.

The social media era has also, it has been argued, ushered in an era of self-obsession among some sports journalists, in which the number of followers on social media accounts becomes an enduring concern. This, Steen argues, fuels a "cult of the personality" in which the social media platform turns the writer into both the publisher and the product (Steen, 2014: 43). This emphasis on the cult of the personality—and Steen's suggestion of the self-commodification of the sports journalist in the process—raises questions about the achievability of 'traditional' journalistic values such as objectivity and impartiality.

Methodology

The data gathered for this research was based on the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). As a methodology, 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). The data, both interviews and diaries, was gathered during 2018 and 2019.

IPA was regarded as a powerful methodological approach for an investigation into digital sports journalism ethics because it aims to capture a vivid sense of the lived experience of the participants—in this case the sense of moral agency of the sports journalists who participated in the research. The IPA comprised two strands: ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a sample of UK sports journalists; and three dairies kept by different sports journalists. In keeping with IPA's methodological principles, the sample was purposive and homogeneous (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2012: 49) in order to enable deep, rich data to be obtained. Homogeneity is, however, a relative concept. The sample was homogeneous in that all participants were UK sports journalists with a working life that involved them, to varying degrees, using social and digital media for professional purposes. This was done so as to enable the data to capture the way the digital era is affecting sports journalists' working practices and experiences. In order to capture a variety of experience, there were both staff members and freelancers, and reporters and editors. There was a mixture of male and female participants, although as the industry continues to be male-dominated the split was weighted 7:3 in terms of male/female. The researcher's contacts in the UK media ensured that the sample of interviewees was readily obtainable. Two of the interviews were conducted by telephone after attempts to arrange face-to-face interviews were repeatedly frustrated by the subjects' overseas travel and work commitments. While the telephone is not an ideal medium for an IPA interview, the prominence and experience of the journalists involved made them important participants, hence their inclusion.

The second strand of IPA data was diaries kept by three different sports journalists for a minimum of six months. These participants were different to the interviewees, ensuring a wider range of voices and experiences were heard. Again, 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 freelancer. All three were male, with it proving difficult to find sports journalists willing to dedicate the time needed to keep a diary for a sustained period of time. 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, 14 and 10 months, with the participants given licence to continue keeping their diaries for longer than originally specified if they wished.

Both interviews and diary-keeping were undertaken because of the different but complementary insights they would provide on being a contemporary sports journalist in the social media age. While an interviewee is by definition responsive to the questions put to them, a diary-keeper (once given the diary's parameters) has more time and opportunity to focus on issues of their selection.

Following each interview data collection event, the interviews were carefully and reflectively transcribed by the researcher verbatim. This process of considered transcription enabled the process of interpreting the interviews to begin. An initial line-by-line analysis of each transcript identified emergent themes. Subsequent readings of each transcript then led to a written distillation of each participant's interview, giving details of the emerging interpretation. Common emerging themes across the different interviews began to be identified and noted. After each case had been written up separately, a second-order cross-case analysis was then performed that identified and analysed common themes.

When each diary was submitted, there was the same approach of 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 diary. As with the interviews, after each case has been written up separately, a second-order cross-case analysis was carried out that identified common themes. The analysis of the interviews and the analysis of

the diaries was then synthesised to enable more focused investigation into the ethical challenges confronting sports journalists in the social media age.

To ensure participants spoke and wrote freely about matters that could be ethically or legally contentious, all participants were assured of anonymity. The interviewees are identified by the first ten letters of the Greek alphabet (Alpha to Kappa), while the diary keepers are named after elements of the phonetic alphabet (November, Oscar and Papa)

Findings

Interviews

A prominent theme that emerges from the IPA interview analysis is the multifarious and sometimes complex ways social media poses ethical and editorial issues for sports journalists. These issues primarily stem from the flattening of the "sports media hierarchy" (Gibbs and Haynes, 2013), with the increased interactivity between journalist and audience posing opportunities but also difficulties. Attitudes to social media vary hugely. Gamma speaks positively of it being the biggest change in their working practice, enabling a closer alignment of their content to fans' interests, while Delta enthusiastically predicts the continued growth of social as their employer seeks to attract a younger demographic. Kappa, on the other hand, refers to social media as "vile" and a "narcissistic endeavour" and ardently insists they would have nothing to do with it were they not a sport journalist, while Iota suggests that big Twitter followings effectively corrupt sports journalists, describing themselves as "fortunate" not to have a very large number of followers.

Echoing Cairns's view on the distribution of sports media misinformation (2018), the majority of interviewees state that social media facilitates the spread of inaccuracies (Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, Zeta, Eta, Theta, Kappa), yet for some it is viewed as a valuable platform because, perhaps surprisingly and paradoxically, it can be a potent driver of improved standards of accuracy. The interactive dimension of social media means reporters feel their work is scrutinised more than ever before, prompting them to be more thorough than they were in the pre-social media era. The audience, they know, will point out inaccuracies and sensationalism (Beta, Gamma, Delta, Theta). As such, social media is not only a spur to competition between sports journalists (Gibbs and Haynes, 2013), but a spur to greater thoroughness—despite the disquiet voiced elsewhere in the interviews about the digital era shortening the amount of time spent on stories. Theta is particularly emphatic about this, and an almost visceral sense emerges of their commitment to getting things absolutely right so that there can be no comeback on social media. Theta explicitly states that they believe social media has raised the standard of sports reporters' work:

> So, I'm always conscious, thinking, 'This is going to be scrutinised to the nth degree and I want to make sure that I've covered every base.' And I think social media's been good for that, I think generally for journalism. I'd like to think it's raised the standard (Theta).

However, it seems to be a fine line between scrutiny and abuse, a point that emerges particularly in Gamma's transcript. If the interactivity facilitated by social media can lead to a raising of the bar in terms of the lengths sports journalists go to ensure accuracy, it is also a platform for abuse, as Binns' work (2017a, 2017b) has suggested. Online abuse—and how to deal with it—occurs in many transcripts: Eta talks of the "vitriol" directed particularly at football journalists by "tribal" fans; Theta admits to the emotionally draining experience of engaging with the negative comments of trolls; Epsilon simply does not use social media interactively; Gamma views online abuse as something that is part of the job ("you've got to accept that you're going to get some at some point"); while for Delta a commonplace concern is whether a piece of social media that they post will open up the subject of that content to abuse. For some participants, online abuse—whether at them or to the subjects of their stories—seems like a commonplace experience. As such, the research builds on Binns's (2017a) findings of online abuse across the newsroom, providing a vivid sense of sports journalists' specific

experience of digital abuse. Having a "thick skin" is mentioned by a number of interviewees as an important quality in a sports journalist in order to weather criticism and knockbacks (Alpha, Beta, Eta, Zeta). However, given the prevalence and nature of some social media abuse, it could be that such a 'thick skin' response could be an inadequate defence mechanism for some working in the industry. While the journalists interviewed cover a variety of sports, football journalists emerge as one subset who are regarded as particularly prone to receiving abuse (Eta, Theta)

Evident in Delta's interview is a keen awareness of the power of social media to be a conduit for abuse, and many of their answers touch on this. Consequently, the complexities of what to post and what not to post on social media is a thread that runs through their interview. In particular, this issue arises when there is a story that it is felt will go down well with the online audience but which is in some way critical of an individual:

> When you know you've got something which will do really well in terms of numbers and people will share, engage with and enjoy but it is almost knocking someone that's another problem that we have, especially with social media. You really have to tread that line quite carefully because you don't want to open people up to personal exposure, personal ridicule, because that's not fair (Delta).

Journalists running the social media accounts of large media organisations therefore need to be careful about who they tag or @-mention in posts. They give a powerful example involving Mo Farah, the distance runner, illustrating how even a positive post about an athlete by a media outlet can result in abuse:

> It's such a simple thing to tag another athlete or something into a post but we have a 22 million audience, so if you—if they're directing any sort of abuse at the [redacted] that's fine because we're just a person sat behind a screen[…] There had been a black and ethnic minority awards, and Mo Farah and I can't remember who else won, but Mo Farah was one of them and we put "congratulations" and tagged Mo Farah in it, and the abuse that was then directed to his Twitter account—because he was tagged in it so people could, you know—all sorts of horrendous stuff, that we just had to take it down because we don't want to inflict that on someone (Delta).

It would appear from their answers that consideration of what will trigger abuse is a commonplace activity: "I think you've just got to be a bit careful not to invite singular abuse to one person, that's what I always look at whenever we're promoting anything online: is that going to invite a lot of abuse?". Delta gives no indication of finding this wearing, but rather it is simply a quotidian part of their role.

With a sense of incredulity, Alpha says that what they post on social media can trigger abuse not only online but in person.

> I think you do have to be careful with Twitter, with what you put. I mean I'm always extremely careful […] I'd post something work-related, maybe an article that I'd written, I'd post a link—hostile reaction. I remember once I posted an article […] I'd put it on Twitter and there was a game later that day—and I actually got abused by fans at that game for reporting factually correct information. Which is absolutely ludicrous, isn't it? (Alpha).

The negative influence of social media hovers through much of the transcription, with Alpha evincing a steady sense of unease about it. The participant feels some sports journalists and media organisations use social media in pursuit of a bigger profile, "and that can lead to an exaggeration of stories and potential fake news". "Wannabe" sports journalists also populate social media. The growth of social media has "certainly spawned a generation of you could call them 'wannabe-journalists' as opposed to bona fide, qualified […] journalists", which adds to the competition.

There are various ways in which social media is viewed with caution by sports journalists. In words reminiscent of Steen's prescription to "choose your views carefully" (2014: 160), Kappa states a wariness of posting on social media due to the fear of words and opinions being "twisted", while Gamma voices concerns that the immediacy of Twitter makes it "dangerous" for sports journalists in that it can draw them into hastily, and rashly, made posts. For Zeta, social media encourages poor journalistic habits, with an increasing dependency on social media making young sports journalists "lazier" and sedentary. They also connect the rise of social media to plagiarism, churnalism and the withering of the variety of sports covered by mainstream media outlets.

The view that social media can be used by sports journalists as a profile-building tool at the expense of truth is conveyed by Alpha, Theta, Iota and Kappa. Their points elaborate on Steen's view of Twitter fuelling a "cult of the personality" among sports journalists (2014: 43). Iota believes it can be seductive and corrupting, with journalists surrendering their independence for the sake of appealing to the Twitter crowd. For those with very large social media followings, they believe Twitter can contaminate a sports journalist's news sense and leave them influenced by what they think will be well received by their followers. The implication is that reporters can be led by their Twitter followers, and that the greater the following the more likely they are to be led. In a related point, they also believe that the increased profile that can come with social media becomes a mechanism for self-censorship, a point developed in the next paragraph. Kappa makes points that echo Iota's, suggesting that the need to be a social media "personality" can eclipse the basic role and tasks of journalism: ego comes to the fore, with an emphasis on perception at the expense of substance.

Iota frames the issue of self-censorship around what they claim is the phenomenon of big-name sports journalists omitting certain stories—or playing them down—for the benefit of their own profiles. Iota says:

> I think there's a major issue with that [self-censorship]—an absolutely major issue. Without naming any names, I think that, umm, if there are columnists, reporters who have more Twitter followers […] than the newspaper sells copies, then there's something wrong. Umm, because there are journalists, there are reporters, who have a very, dare I say, clever way of manipulating when another paper does a genuine story, umm, for their own means, for their own Twitter followers, for their own personal gain of going on TV and radio and commenting on it, and giving it a very positive twist that goes against what a, what a tabloid newspaper or another newspaper would do […] Some journalists will topspin those and will, will, as you say, withhold information that they do know because they feel like they're going to get a more positive reaction on Twitter or other social media or on the radio if they say 'Oh no, I know him he's a lovely lad' and, you know, 'I've never heard things like that before'. And I wouldn't, I wouldn't accuse them of, you know, of wrongdoing in that, but I think that is an absolute dilemma (Iota).

Social media, and the increased profile that can come with it, therefore becomes a mechanism for self-censorship, and Iota's dislike for those who practice it is evident. Iota generally views social media with caution. For those with very large social media followings, they believe Twitter can skew a sports journalist's news sense and leave them unduly influenced:

> If you were a reporter with a very large number of followers—hundreds of thousands if not millions of followers—fortunately I'm not in that position, I keep quite quiet on Twitter, and err, but if you are one of those people then your alerts and notifications light up and that is going to influence your decision-making. And it shouldn't. You know, it should […] ok, that can be part of it, but it shouldn't be the driving force and I think that, umm, you know, as I say, this would be a long debate with some reporters who do have a lot of Twitter followers, but I

would suggest to them that they are influenced too much by, by those followers and they would often take a stance in a column that they shouldn't do (Iota).

The implication is that reporters pander to their Twitter followers; and the larger the following, the greater the pandering.

Social media is viewed with unease by a number of other interviewees. Alpha "self-edits" what they put on social media due to the fear of the "hostile" reaction a post might receive. Kappa vividly expresses their loathing of social media and the damage they believe it can do to sports media. They view social media as a necessary evil of their profession and would not use it if they weren't a journalist:

> *Kappa: "If I'm really honest, if I didn't do this job I would not be on social media. I've got no interest in it whatsoever. I find it vile.*
>
> *TB: But you feel a, it's almost an occupational necessity?*
>
> *Kappa: Absolutely. Yeah, I feel like I would not be relevant if I wasn't on it. And I feel like my—I'm going to sound like one of these, and this is what I hate—I feel like my profile wouldn't be high if I wasn't on it. And I feel nowadays that people are given jobs based on profile—think influencer.*

Kappa is concerned that social media, both for young sports journalists and established big-name journalists, is a "narcissistic endeavour" where profile trumps accuracy. Considering young journalists, they say: "You know, again, it becomes a narcissistic endeavour of—I want to get noticed, so I'm going to say this and see who picks up on it. Well, who's then going to find out whether that's true or not?". And for senior journalists, Kappa suggests the need to be a "personality" can eclipse the basic role and tasks of journalism.

Connectedly, Kappa readily admits they self-censor their radio punditry and social media, primarily out of concern at how what they say will be portrayed and twisted on social media. Kappa goes on to say that they enjoy broadcasting less as a consequence:

> I'm probably over-cautious. I probably overly self-censor because stuff gets twisted all the time and so I'm really conscious, I mean I'm quite, I'm really careful what I put on Twitter. I'm actually nervous—I've been doing stuff back on [redacted] again—I'm actually nervous about it. I can't enjoy—I don't enjoy myself broadcasting as much as I used to because everybody just wants to pick up on one negative thing that you've said or twist something you've said and, as I say, that then becomes fact, even when it's taken out of context, and because you don't have a right of reply and because I don't spend my life on social media, umm, there's then a worry that people have got a perception of you or your opinion or that you slagged someone (Kappa).

Kappa appears to view social media as a corrupting and distorting influence, where profile and perception is placed above truth and substance.

Diaries

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 made to feel striking by both 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 (Bradshaw and Minogue, 2020; Cairns, 2018; Sheffer and Schultz, 2010).

In the diary, Oscar's only references to social media are two instances where they describe how they use Twitter to directly contact players. It reads like Twitter direct messages (DMs) have supplanted phone numbers as the principal way Oscar contacts players. It is noteworthy that Oscar does not give consideration to whether this constitutes an over-familiarity or a slight infraction into a player's privacy.

Social platforms are both a boon and potential problem for November. They can be a source of stories, but they can also be platforms on which verification can be difficult: "Social media is an important tool in the news gathering process in this day and age but it doesn't always tick all the checks and balances you should go through when producing a story."

Rather than focusing on ethical issues occasioned by social media, the diaries primarily focus on more established, pre-digital ethical issues, such as the appropriate distance or closeness that a sports journalist should have with their sources (Boyle 2006a and 2006b) and, relatedly, the nature of the on-the-record/off-the-record distinction. This highlights how, while social media has brought about fresh ethical issues, more traditional ethical problems still occupy sports journalists' thinking.

Summary of Findings

There is an imbalance in the depth of findings from the two different methods. While the interviews yielded extensive reflections on how social media has affected the ethics of sports journalism, the diaries yielded data that was less focused on social platforms but more on other areas of sports journalism practice. What the diaries illustrate is how, alongside the new ethical issues arising in the social media era, more long-standing pre-social media issues persist too. However, what emerges from both interviews and November's diary is how social media is simultaneously both a potential boon and a burden for sports journalists as they navigate ethical issues.

IPA is a methodological approach which is idiographic; that is, it has a focus on the particular. It is concerned with the deep experience and reflections of individuals. As such, generalisations can only be made tentatively. However, from the interview data it can be cautiously inferred that online abuse of sports journalists is widespread, and that for some participants online abuse— whether at them or to the subjects of their stories—is a quotidian experience. Interestingly, social media is viewed as facilitating the spread of inaccuracies yet is perceived by some as a powerful driver of improved standards of accuracy due to sports journalists feeling that their work is under greater scrutiny than ever before. More generally, sports journalists have mixed feelings about whether social media has been a positive thing for their work. Social media is seen by some sports journalists as a corrupting influence on the integrity of sports journalism, with large Twitter followings sometimes tarnishing sports journalists by influencing them to make editorial judgements based on their followers' anticipated reaction. In addition, social media has led to new—and arguably more complex— forms of self-censorship among sports journalists.

Conclusion and Recommendation for Industry

Social media has introduced—or intensified—a host of ethical issues for sports journalists, not least self-censorship and the connected phenomenon of how to deal with the online abuse that is directed at them. Based on the current research, such abuse seems to be particularly voluminous and intense for football journalists, although not confined to them. Having a "thick skin" is the common prescription for dealing with such abuse, but this seems an inadequate response given the prevalence and toxicity of some abuse, and given the need to protect journalists' mental health. As such, this research concludes with a recommendation for industry. Employers and sports journalism organisations, such as the Sports Journalists' Association and the Football Writers' Association in the UK, and member organisations of the Association Internationale de la Presse Sportive (AIPS) throughout the world, should consider drafting guidance and organising forums where instances of abuse can be shared and where victims can receive support. The guidance could be two-fold: firstly, advising journalists what to do if they are abused online, and secondly, guiding media outlets on the support they should offer to staff in the event of abuse.

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