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Complicity and Sports Journalism

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Abstract: The extent to which sports journalists' close relationship with their subjects and sources has made them complicit in enabling those subjects to achieve their economic and reputational goals is an enduring ethical concern in sports journalism (Boyle 2006a; Bradshaw and Minogue 2020). Critics accuse sports journalists of lacking a critical distance (Hardin, Zhong and Whiteside 2009) and being "cheerleaders" rather than watchdogs (Rowe 2007). This chapter analyses the issue of sports journalism complicity through the lens of self-censorship, using a standpoint of Kantian moral reasoning and semi-structured interviews with UK-based sports journalists to understand the ways in which sports media information flows are compromised. Different categories of complicit coverage are identified, including the alleged phenomenon of sportswashing. Means by which complicit reporting can be mitigated are discussed, with the role of 'Fifth Estate' non-professional bloggers considered in this regard. This chapter is a contribution to the growing body of literature aimed at highlighting the multiplicity of ways in which information flows in sports media can be inhibited, compromised and curtailed by journalists' relationships with the professional sports organisations, events and individuals they are covering.

Key terms: complicity, sports journalism, sportswashing, Kant, Fifth Estate

Introductory remarks

Among the defining professional values of journalism have been independence and impartiality (Harcup 2007; Minogue and Thompson 2021: 99), yet the notion of sports journalists' complicity, collusion and cosiness with their sources and subjects has emerged as

a persistent ethical concern (Boyle 2006a and 2006b; Bradshaw and Minogue 2020; Rowe 2005; Sefiha 2010; Sugden and Tomlinson 2007). In some instances, the complicity is stark, not least in the punchline here from cycling journalist Jeremy Whittle's 'warts-and-all' book *Bad Blood*:

Journalists develop an intimacy with the riders that is rare in other sports. They catch the same flights as they shuttle from race to race; they stay in the same hotels; they bump into them in lifts or in breakfast buffets, exchanging greetings and a word or two of encouragement. They share their success and failures, wince at their injuries, develop friendships with their families and – in one case I know of – transport their drugs for them (Whittle 2009: 5).

Complicity involves actions or omissions which have the potential consequence of insulating a wrongdoer from exposure or criticism. Indeed, it has been argued that complicity in a general sense has a causal dynamic, whereby someone acts complicitly if their action – or failure to act – is something that they know, or should know, might enable a misdeed to be perpetrated or go undetected (Lepora and Goodin, 2015).

Complicity in sports journalism can be subtle, and underpinning many of the previous academic discussions about complicity in the sports media, if implicitly, has been the concept of self-censorship. It is this through the lens of self-censorship that this chapter examines issues of complicity in sports journalism. Complicity, this chapter argues, cannot be properly understood without considering it in conjunction with the phenomenon of self-censorship by journalists. Kantian practical reasoning is used to philosophically interrogate

the issue, while semi-structured interviews with 10 UK-based sports journalists ground the chapter in the ethical realities of day-to-day sports reporting. The contemporary issue of ‘sportswashing’ – the process by which countries allegedly seek to launder their poor human rights records by hosting or investing in major sports events and clubs (Ronay 2019) – and sports journalists’ potential complicity in this process provides a case study. This chapter is a contribution to the growing body of literature aimed at highlighting the multiplicity of ways in which information flows in sports media can be inhibited and compromised by journalists’ relationships with the professional sports organisations, events and individuals they are covering.

Journalistic complicity and self-censorship

Boyle (2006a; 2006b) contends that the closeness of the relationship between sports journalists and many of the organisations that they cover means they run the risk of producing content that is “complicit” with those organisations’ economic and reputational 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. The cheerleading motif appears in literature on sports journalism across the Western world. Within the American literature, sports journalism is sometimes referred to as being tainted by a “boys’ club” reputation, where the industry is seen as “fraternities of sorts where there is little or no critical distance between reporters and the athletes, teams, and organizations they cover, especially at the professional level” (Hardin,

Zhong and Whiteside 2009: 320). Some sports journalists have been accused of turning from “critical eyewitnesses into entertainment vendors” (Horky and Stelzner 2015: 123). In the UK, many of the most withering accusations of cheerleading have come from within the industry itself. Andrew Jennings, the freelance investigative sports journalist who exposed corruption on the International Olympic Committee and at FIFA, frequently questioned the integrity and quality of sports journalists (Jennings 2012; Ponsford 2010; Miller 2015; Turvill 2015). An interview piece with him published in the *Washington Post* the day after Sepp Blatter resigned as president of FIFA in 2015 saw Jennings label many of his football journalism colleagues “idiot reporters” for their timid lines of questioning and their refusal to engage with issues of corruption that were hidden in plain sight (Miller 2015). Indeed, swirling under the surface of much sports media academic literature and the broader industry literature on complicity, but not identified by name, is the undertow of self-censorship. To accurately diagnose issues of ethical concern in sports journalism and to remedy them, there is therefore a need for self-censorship in sports journalism to be openly identified and anatomised, a project I have begun elsewhere (Bradshaw 2018; 2021a; 2021b; Bradshaw and Minogue 2020).

Self-censorship has been viewed as a journalistic vice in the United Kingdom since at least the early-Victorian period, as this leader from *The Times* on 6 February 1852 makes clear:

The first duty of the press is to obtain the earliest and most correct intelligence of the events of the time, and instantly by disclosing them, make them the common property of the nation... For us, with whom publicity and truth are the air and light of existence, there can be no greater disgrace than to recoil from the frank and accurate disclosure

of facts as they are. We are bound to tell the truth as we find it, without fear of consequence (quoted in Harcup 2007: 28).

Three important elements of self-censorship are touched upon within this editorial. The first is that self-censorship is viewed as a heinous professional failing (“no greater disgrace”), something which the industry emphasises right up to the present day through the first clause of the International Federation of Journalists’ Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists, which states: “Respect for the truth and for the right of the public to truth is the first duty of the journalist” (International Federation of Journalists, 2019). Secondly, self-censorship is seen as involving a form of hesitancy (“recoil”), which is indirectly linked to a sense of “fear”. This notion of fear – the third facet of self-censorship which the passage touches on – is important because contemporary discussions of the phenomenon argue that the fear of upsetting or alienating the established authorities is a cause of self-censorship (Sturges, 2008). However, the passage only touches on one type of self-censorship: the censoring of expressions of *fact*. It does not address the issue of whether the withholding or dilution of expressions of honestly held personal *opinion* by journalists is similarly “disgraceful”. This distinction between fact-self-censorship and opinion-self-censorship is important, not least because the growth of social media lends itself towards a more opinion-focused sports news culture (Roberts and Emmons, 2016; Sherwood and Nicholson, 2012). In particular, there is evidence that sports journalists are reluctant to cover issues around transgender sport because of the toxic vehemence with which different sides on the debate mobilise social media to voice their opinions (Minogue and Thompson, 2021). To avoid becoming recipients of online abuse and avoid running the risk of being journalistically ‘cancelled’, sports journalists refrain from fully engaging with the issue or from expressing views on it

(Minogue and Thompson 2021: 84); they self-censor and retreat from an important social issue of the day.

As *The Times* editorial illustrates, media self-censorship was a concern in the 19th century, if not a concept that was explicitly named. The leading article conveys, too, the sense in which self-censorship is closely connected to truth, or rather truth's negation. Writing from a contemporary US perspective, Sedler defines self-censorship as "the decision by an individual or group to refrain from speaking and the decision by a media organization to refrain from publishing information" (2012), and regards self-censorship as compromising the values of the First Amendment due to it being a phenomenon that inhibits the dissemination of information or ideas to the public. As with *The Times'* leader, self-censorship is thus closely connected to the muffling of truth or to the muffling of discourse that could lead to truth's emergence.

Prima facie modern examples of complicitous muffling are instances where "reporters may shy away from writing critical stories in fear of losing access to the athletes" (Hardin, Zhong and Whiteside, 2009: 324). One example they cite is American sports journalists' failure to report on steroid abuse in Major League Baseball in the first decade of the 21st century; reporters knew of the abuse but did not cover it. Elsewhere, "selectivity" is a term in the literature that is arguably a euphemism for self-censorship, as when it is used in the following context: "The wish to gain exclusives and maintain favoured access can induce selectivity, limited search and the possibility of manipulation" (Tiffen, 1989: 122). Put another way, cultivating and maintaining sources can, on this understanding, require judicious, pragmatic self-censorship, with negative, hard news that could alienate the

source going unpublished or uninvestigated. As Keeble claims, “Inevitably journalists can become friends with their elite sources and that can subtly ‘soften’ coverage and cement loyalties” (2009: 108), establishing the bonds of complicity. This complex issue around pragmatic self-censorship as a means of maintaining sources is one that poses a knotty dilemma for journalists, and which requires further interrogation.

As the Whittle (2009) excerpt at the start of this chapter suggests, cycling is a sport where journalistic complicity is arguably more pronounced than in most others (Kimmage 2007; Walsh 2012). Sefiha’s (2010) ethnographic study of a US cycling magazine’s coverage of the use of performance-enhancing drugs (PEDs) is pertinent and forms a useful link to this chapter’s next section, which focuses on the application of Kantian ethics to the sports media. Sefiha’s 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 the abuse of PEDs 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 refers to Whittle’s view of professional cycling as a community that imposes a Mafia-style code of *omerta* on those within the community – cyclists, cycling teams and the journalists who cover the sport form a type of club, and broadcasting to the outside world what goes on inside the club results in being ostracised from the club. Quoting from Whittle’s memoir – “In this brutalized environment you had to make a choice; speak out and risk alienation or keep your mouth shut and stay in the club” (Whittle 2008: 225) – 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 you can no longer report on the sport effectively

on a daily basis from the 'inside'; or keep quiet about the wrongdoing so that you preserve source relations and are able to report effectively – that is, with access to sources – from the inside on a day-to-day basis (Sefiha 2010: 209).

While not using the idiom of moral philosophy, 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 (“foreseeing the results” and “an obligation, regardless of its effects”):

Foreseeing the results of publishing potentially damaging information are issues that *Bikesport* writers grappled with daily. Far from linear, journalist discretion can best be described as a host of in-the-moment decisions informed by professional training, workplace socialization, and individual consciousness... One writer noted, “We have an obligation, if we find something that needs to get out, you have an obligation, regardless of its effects, to get it out there. Now in reality, it's not that clean but we all have that obligation” (Sefiha 2010: 209-210).

Sefiha's interviewees also revealed a strand of self-preserving consequentialist thinking, according to which they seek to anticipate whether the publication of the contentious fact(s) will lead to either positive or negative professional outcomes for themselves personally:

Nearly every writer explained their decision-making as conducted on a case by case basis, free of any 'hard and fast' answers. “You just make a cost-benefit analysis. I

create in my head a list of positives and negatives” was one writer’s description (Sefiha, 2010: 210).

Yet editorial decision-making by a process of cost-benefit analysis arguably undermines the commitment to accurate reporting enshrined as the first clause in so many journalistic codes of practice, and is at odds with the professional credo espoused in *The Times* leader analysed above. The next section will make the case for why journalistic moral imperatives should be prioritised over cost-benefit analyses related to media access and ‘staying inside the club’.

Kantian considerations

Kant’s duty-based ethics resonates with the idiom used in journalistic codes of conduct, which have a deontological register. Like Kant’s categorical imperative, codes invoke a deontological language of obligation (e.g. “must”, “should”, “must not”), as Keeble has noted (2009: 15).

Kantian perspectives have been applied before when considering journalism ethics (Sanford Horner 2015), but this has largely been done to news content rather than sports media.

Jacquette, for example, uses a Kantian idiom – if not an explicit reference to deontology – when he writes of seeking to distil “the unifying expression of a professional moral imperative” for journalistic ethics (Jacquette 2010: 214), and states his imperative as follows: “Journalists are morally committed to maximally relevant truth-telling in the public interest and for the public good” (Jacquette 2007: 19). I have analysed sports journalism ethics through the prism of deontology before (2018), and this chapter builds on that groundwork.

Here, it is contended that Kant’s concepts of the hypothetical imperative and the categorical imperative can be adapted and deployed as part of an analysis that seeks to make explicit a

distinction in sports journalists' contrasting approaches to the ethics of newsgathering. In his writings on ethics and the formulation of his categorical imperative, Kant (1788/1997; 1785/2005) 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). As the above discussion of Sefiha (2010) and the wider literature suggests, a tension can arise in sports journalists' practical reasoning 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.

There is a 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, retaining access to sources), 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 split journalists into two groups, that is not to say that there is not some blurring and overlap of the division, with some journalists – at different times in their careers, or even at different times covering the same sport or story – moving from one position of practical reasoning into the other, a phenomenon indicated by Sefiha (2010: 210: "...it's not that clean but we all have that obligation") and vividly captured in the autobiographical writings of the award-winning sports journalist David Walsh

(Bradshaw 2018). Further, it could be objected that some sports journalists might pursue what would appear to be the journalistic hypothetical imperative as a means of facilitating a longer-term goal of gaining access to the heart of an issue, and thereby, ultimately, fulfil the categorical imperative of truth-telling. This point carries weight, especially when considered against the litmus test of practical reporting realities, and this chapter does not argue for a neat binary distinction between the two imperatives by asserting that sports journalists are of necessity unethical unless they undeviatingly and without exception meet the – perhaps impossible – demands of the journalistic categorical imperative. Instead, it contends that the balance should be weighted more on the side of the categorical rather than the hypothetical, in order to guard against the complicity which a preponderance of the latter induces, as vividly captured by front-line accounts of the nature of cycling journalism (Walsh 2012; Whittle 2009). It may well be that temporarily pursuing a more hypothetical imperative agenda can facilitate the completion of noble, longer-term journalistic aims. But sports journalists need to be on their guard against the easy-living seductions that the hypothetical journalistic imperative can exert.

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 approve the 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"), oughts which in a journalistic context jointly prescribe "maximally relevant truth-telling in the public interest", to use Jacquette's wording (2017: 19). 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 only act on principles which can be universalised. So, the Kantian journalist could argue that publishing an article that withheld the truth, or deliberately not pursuing a story despite having evidence 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. Journalistic communication is premised on truth-telling, or at least the vigorous, uncompromising pursuit of it, and self-censorship of fact – a process involving a recoil from publication – is an activity that stands in contradiction to it, undermining the very practice and institution of journalism. The abnegation of truth-telling through sustained self-censorship arguably generates a form of anti-sports journalism – a tissue of deceptive fluff – that David Walsh and Paul Kimmage have vividly encapsulated in their accounts of other journalists' work covering cycling's doping issues. (Walsh has written of the press room at the Tour de France being "crammed to dangerous levels with sycophants and time servers" (2012: 88), and Kimmage of fellow journalists forming a "Muppet Show" of "fans with typewriters" delivering fawning portraits at the expense of pursuing the doping issues they are aware of (2007: 280-281).) If the edicts of the journalistic categorical imperative are set aside by too many for too long then the institution of journalism is dismantled.

This discussion of deontology has contained elements of abstraction while trying to illuminate contrasting approaches to sports reporting. Indeed, it has contained *aspirational* notions around how sports journalism would ideally function rather than a purely *descriptive* account of how they actually do. But how, it can be legitimately asked, does it relate to a contemporary media landscape driven by social media, and how could a Kantian approach mitigate the risks of complicit journalism?

Complicity and the contemporary media ecosystem

Boyle (2006a) has contended that the increased commercialisation of professional sport and concomitant problems such as corruption and cheating (for example through doping) means there is an urgent need for bold, independent-minded, inquiring sports journalism. His contention, made in Twitter's year of foundation, that "the expansion of the sports industry and the range of commercial and political stakeholders involved also means that rigorous, uncomplicit journalism is required in this area as never before" (Boyle, 2006a: 5) is no less important now – in fact, arguably more so, as organisations use the social media ecosystem as a platform to push their agendas. During the last decade the sports media has undergone a paradigm shift in which sports clubs have become rival publishers (Kilvington and Price, 2021: 104). Elite clubs, associations and governing bodies are now involved in "corporate publishing" which involves the production and dissemination of primarily digital content, such as website material and social content, that serves those organisations' corporate objectives, namely, fan or customer loyalty, brand building and increased turnover (Wiske and Horky, 2021: 37). Wiske and Horky locate sports journalists in a field distinct from these commercial motivations, where there is a "requirement for maintaining distance from subjects involved and for correspondingly objective reporting" (ibid.).

Such corporate publishing has enabled teams and tournaments to communicate directly with supporters, cutting out journalists and arguably meaning that the power dynamic between clubs and journalists has shifted from symbiosis to parasitism, “with many piggybacking sports journalists now dependent on their more powerful host” (Bradshaw and Minogue 2020: 112). This position is supported by data gathered through semi-structured interviews with UK-based sports journalist for this chapter, with one stating: “What’s interesting is the way that sports organisations are taking ownership of content and understanding how they can control content more and [...] there’s an increasing and worrying trend towards limiting access towards independent journalists” (*Interviewee 7*). Two interviewees (2 and 10) invoked the notion of elite clubs wanting to “sanitise” content, with one asserting: “Access certainly to a leading side is getting less and less, and more and more sanitised. They [clubs] want it all in-house and no dissenting voices” (*Interviewee 2*). With clubs seeking to control their messages through large communications departments, another journalist said that clubs “will try and bully you”, adding that “guts to stick up for yourself” is now a professional requirement (*Interviewee 6*). Another interviewee, a football journalist who has also worked in club media, also put matters starkly:

I think the competition’s changed from being rival newspapers to being media against club media [...] I think the higher up you go the footballing pyramid the harder it is to get underneath the skin of it now. I think there’s a lot of stuff that doesn’t get reported at Premier League level because you just can’t get close enough to it (*Interviewee 3*).

Research into media coverage of the Bundesliga, the top division of German football, involving interviews with the heads of media at 18 Bundesliga sides and an online survey with 174 print sports journalists covering those clubs made similar findings (Grimmer 2017). It showed that both sides viewed journalists as more dependent on the spokespeople than the other way round. Ninety per cent of journalists asserted that clubs' spokespeople withheld information and did not constantly tell the truth, while 73 per cent regarded the authorisation of interview articles as a form of censorship (Grimmer *ibid.*). With clubs fulfilling such gatekeeping functions, there is the attendant risk of hard-pressed, time-short journalists (Cairns 2018) lapsing into complicit activities as they subserviently relay what is distributed and approved to them via clubs. Their journalistic autonomy is potentially under threat by sports organisations' increasing control of information flows.

Mitigating the publication of complicit content

How might independent sports journalism resist the growing media power of sports organisations and, relatedly, ensure content is not complicit with those organisations' aims? Developing Lawrence and Crawford (2018), the contemporary state of hyper-digitised content production and consumption is characterised by Domeneghetti as *Sports Journalism 3.0*, where "a tech-savvy sports media audience continually interacting with, and via, omnipresent digital and social media necessitates a similarly digitally literate and dynamic sports journalism workforce" (2021: 2). A key term here is "dynamic". Developing this concept of journalistic dynamism further we might add that it connotes an appetite for independent newsgathering, rather than a passivity of output underpinned by information subsidies from clubs and governing bodies, which in turn is arguably allied to the pursuit of the journalistic categorical imperative of truth-gathering and truth-telling, Domeneghetti's

dynamism suggests too a close relationship between journalists and their audience, facilitated by social media. This is a double-edged sword. While some fans are eschewing traditional sports news outlets in favour of fan-produced content (Randles, 2021) there is evidence that the growing role fulfilled by citizen bloggers can further the task of delivering non-complicit content. Scrutinising those in positions of power and authority has long been considered a Fourth Estate function of the press, but McEnnis (2021) explores how the “Fifth Estate” of informed “citizen” bloggers with specialist knowledge of certain fields (such as finance and sports law) can now be regarded as fulfilling such a watchdog function that delivers non-complicit content. This Fifth Estate has gained credibility as “citizens have been empowered by digital networks to both practise and publish serious journalism” (2021: 49). McEnnis cites the blog published by finance lecturer Kieran Maguire (priceoffootball.com) and *Rangers Tax Case* (rangerstaxcase.wordpress.com/) as two examples (2021: 54). Such citizen bloggers also serve to hold professional journalists accountable and keep them on their mettle. As the Roman playwright Juvenal asked, *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* (“Who guards the guardians?”), and in the context of modern journalism the answer is the wider blogosphere and social media users, all of whom combine to arguably provide a process of social media-driven checks and balances which make sport journalists more scrutinised than ever before (Bradshaw and Minogue 2019: 136). Citizen bloggers’ activities may help ensure that professional sports journalists’ failures to fulfil their foundational journalistic duties of impartial truth-telling will be called out.

A passive sports journalism of confirmation is to be avoided, certainly if traditional values of independence and impartiality are to be upheld (Harcup 2007; Minogue and Thompson 2021). If too much information is left to be issued by teams and governing bodies then

those organisations become the arbiters of truth and the controllers of its release. And this at a time when, as discussed above, there is evidence that clubs, leagues and federations are taking increasing steps to flex their gate-keeping muscles. As one interviewee put it to the author, “some press officers regard themselves as a barrier, like the guard dog at the gates” (*Interviewee 6*), adding: “they will lie, they will not tell you stuff, they’ll deliberately block you, turn down any [interview] requests without even taking the requests to the coach or to the staff.” In the teeth of such control, Interviewee 7 admitted to the temptation to produce complicit content that ensured a “quiet life”. For him, echoing the findings of Sefiha (2010), there remained a tension between duty and consequence:

I would personally say you have a professional duty as a journalist to report what you know. I think that is often compromised by relationships on the ground [...] I think we’ve all been guilty down the years of not writing what we know. Because ultimately, I guess, if we all wrote everything we knew we wouldn’t stay in the game that long (*Interviewee 7*).

Deontological threads recur in sports journalists’ practical reasoning, but when these are eclipsed by more consequentialist lines of thought (often based around notions of self-preservation) there is a danger that journalists’ content – through what it omitted as much as through what is published – becomes complicit. While an entirely non-complicit sports media might be an unobtainable ideal due to practical realities and the pressure to play a ‘longer game’ of truth-telling, the discussion and cognizance of complicity within the industry is important to mitigate its prevalence (Bradshaw and Minogue, 2020).

Sportswashing and the sports journalism launderette

The contemporary debate around complicity in the sports media needs to encompass the issue of so-called sportswashing. Sportswashing is the soft-power activity of hosting or investing in sports events in an effort to manipulate the global populace in order to “launder a reputation, to gloss a human rights record, to wash a little blood away” (Ronay, 2019). A report by the human rights group Grant Liberty contends that Saudi Arabia has spent \$1.5 billion since 2016 investing in sportswashing activities as the Kingdom seeks to co-opt international star athletes to launder its reputation (Grant Liberty, 2021). This report followed repeated claims by Amnesty International that Saudi Arabia, under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, had initiated a sportswashing programme intended to cleanse and distract from its human rights record (Amnesty International, 2020). The spend identified by Grant Liberty includes hosting sporting events ranging from golf and football to boxing and UFC. The question of who is potentially complicit in this process of alleged sportswashing is explicitly raised in the report: “No one should feel comfortable being made complicit with this regime” (Grant Liberty, 2021).

While the report urges sports stars to ensure they are not complicit in furthering the Saudi state’s ends, it is a natural extension of this to assert that the sports media also needs to be attuned to whether it might be unthinkingly colluding by engaging in certain types of coverage. While sport may have been “bought, sold, fluffed, preened, primed and generally co-opted by those in power ever since it first appeared as a public spectacle” (Ronay, 2019), including by the West, the increased globalisation of sport and the increasingly complex web of funding behind it arguably makes the financing of sport – and the motivations of those who invest – a matter of urgent scrutiny. The tangled web of

football's financing in particular makes economic literacy essential not optional for those purporting to investigate and understand contemporary media sport. Such literacy could function as a bulwark against complicity.

Ronay, a journalist for the *Guardian*, asserts that journalists are indeed "complicit" as things stand, stating: "If sportswashing is taking place it is newspapers and websites and TV channels that propagate it, that dutifully reproduce its images and style the narrative" (Ronay 2019). It might be said that such "dutiful reproduction" should be replaced by a duty of independent, autonomous challenge of the wider contexts that surround an elite, professional sports event.

Boyle may once have urged sports journalists to "run away from the circus" (2006b) in order to ensure that they did not become unwittingly caught up in producing complicit content. Now we might say that sports journalists need to ensure they are running away from the launderette, stopping off to buy themselves a calculator on the way. The danger of unwitting complicity persists. Yet there should be a wariness of a discourse that confines the debate around sportswashing to just Gulf states, or indeed states from any particular part of the world. All mega-events of the sporting calendar deserve the social, cultural and economic contextualisation that ensure sports journalism does not operate in the narrow "self-imposed and isolating limits" that some contend the industry has created for itself (Rowe 2007: 401). There should be a globalised focus on non-complicit content – a prescription which takes us back to the foundational ideal of an independent and impartial media that holds power to account.

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