Defining sports news

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Facts about sport versus sports news

What is it that elevates certain *facts* about sport into sports *news*? Why does Player X's injury receive news coverage, while Player Y's does not? Both are facts, yet one fact is regarded – for whatever reason – as more *newsworthy* than another, and will, therefore, go on to be included within an article, a social media update or a broadcast. The other fact, meanwhile, remains unpublished, unread and, therefore, potentially unknown. Perhaps one way of considering the distinction between facts and news is the following: while all news is fact (or at least should be, notwithstanding the era of *fake news*), not all facts are news. There are millions of statements of sporting fact that could be made every day, but not all of those facts constitute news.

Every day, a sports journalist or sports editor encounters a welter of facts about the sport or sports they cover. However, only some of those facts will become news, in the sense that only some will go on to be selected for a website or programme. A fundamental point to recognise here – and it can be something that journalists themselves forget amid the hurly-burly of the 24/7 news cycle – is that sports news (like all news) is not something that is somehow preordained or self-selecting. Rather, it is the outcome of a complicated chain of human decisions and human processes. Moreover, in today's social media-dominated news culture, it is not just journalists who make decisions about what is newsworthy – fans can do so too, through the publication or sharing of content on social media platforms and blogs, or through comments they may make online about a certain piece that a journalist has produced. Think about the last time you retweeted or shared a social media post about information relating to sport. Indirectly, you were making a decision about the level of interest – or newsworthiness – of a certain nugget of content. In that moment, you yourself had become part of the many-headed beast of early twenty-first-century digital culture which determines what the sports news *is*. While sports journalists continue to form a group distinct from their audience, they are no longer handing down news to their audience from on high. In some instances – many instances – non-journalists are making decisions about what constitutes sports news. Content in many instances has become increasingly "fan-led" in the digital age; editors and reporters are constantly trying to anticipate what content is going to stimulate response and engagement from the supporters of a particular sport or club. The concept of fan-led content will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

The following somewhat crude scenario illustrates the complicated and changing factors at play in what elevates *facts about sport* into *sports news*. For a moment, put yourself in the shoes of the duty sports editor of a media outlet that publishes both online content and a printed newspaper. On a specified day, you have six reporters at your disposal. A year ago, you had nine reporters, but cutbacks mean you have fewer journalists to cover the same number of clubs and events, meaning you have to be more selective in deciding where to send your reporters. You make the decision – perhaps following a conference with the editor-in-chief of your organisation, and also having viewed your rivals' most recent content – that you want each of the reporters to attend press conferences at certain sports clubs around the country. That very decision in itself starts to set a boundary for what is going to constitute the news for your media organisation, and, by extension, its audience or readership. The decision to deploy your reporters to certain clubs *excludes* other clubs. Perhaps you make some of those deployments on grounds of the geographical proximity of some clubs compared with others. Most of your staff are based in London, say, so you focus on clubs in the Greater London area, both for reasons of accessibility and to keep travelling expense costs down. Your reporters will then interview certain coaches and players rather than other coaches and players, again *narrowing the voices or sources of information* that will make it into your media organisation's output. Another complicating factor here is that each sports club's media department will, in most cases, decide which players or coaches are available to be interviewed at a press conference, so these media departments themselves also influence the voices that will be heard and – indirectly – the news that will be produced by sports journalists and consumed by sports supporters. Upon completing their interviews, each journalist will make a decision about what they think is the best "angle" or "top line" for a story. They will usually discuss this with you, the sports editor, over the phone, and what will emerge through this conversation is the way in which each story is going to be treated.

What quotes are juiciest? What information needs to be put online immediately? What quotes or information can perhaps be held back for a story at a later date? What angles are rival outlets likely to take on the same interview? You will also consider what focus is likely to go down best with your organisation's target audience (Andrews, 2014: 17). From this discussion will emerge the emphasis or *line* for each piece. Your reporters will then write their article, file their stories with you, and as duty editor you will then review their copy to make sure you are happy with it. This could involve you "re-nosing" a story – by which is meant giving it what you think is a more compelling, newsworthy introduction – and other forms of editing; maybe you will remove certain quotes because you think the piece is too long. The piece may well be put through another colleague's hands, a subeditor, before it is published underneath a headline that the subeditor has chosen. By the time the sports news is published, the sequence of human interactions that have gone into it mean that, in a significant sense, the news has been constructed or *manufactured* (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996: 3; Harcup, 2015: 42). It has not simply fallen from the heavens and landed on a mobile screen, tablet or newspaper. Instead, decisions involving resources, logistics, access to interviewees, the target audience and subjective decisions about newsworthiness have all gone into the process. What emerges is not inevitable. Instead, it is the result of a complex web of decisions.

This process of whittling down facts until what emerges is the "news" is called *gatekeeping* (White, 1950; Harcup, 2015: 44–45). On this model, it is journalists – and specifically editors – who decide when to "open" the gate to let through certain facts into wider public awareness. By deciding to publish or broadcast certain material, some facts become news while others remain metaphorically stuck behind the gate and therefore unknown to the audience.

There are numerous factors that *influence* what gets included in the sports news and the sports media more widely. Media content, as one influential text has put it, is "shaped, pounded, constrained, encouraged by a multitude of forces" (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996: ix). These forces arguably include the routines that journalists and news organisations have around their work (such as having to work with the press officers of sports clubs to secure access to sports stars), and the sometimes unconscious yielding to market forces (the desire of journalists to produce what they think is going to sell and what they think might keep advertisers happy).

But let us return again to our scenario. Imagine once again that you are back in our fictitious newsroom, wearing the shoes of the duty sports editor. Whilst trawling through TweetDeck or another platform that enables you to keep track of what is emerging or trending on social media, you come across videos that appear to have been posted by a golf fan of a big-name golfer stumbling out of a nightclub in Atlanta, Georgia, the day before the Masters is due to start. You speak to your social media editor, who is working next to you on the sports desk, and after some time spent verifying the provenance of the footage, she confirms that they seem to be genuine. Social media is abuzz with comments about the videos, which have gone viral. You immediately phone your golf correspondent and discuss how you are best going to cover the story and *throw it forward* (i.e. develop the story in an original way). All of a sudden, as a sports news organisation you are playing catch-up to content that has originally been captured and published by a non-journalist. Rather than playing gatekeeper, you are, instead, frantically sprinting after facts that have been released into the wild by a member of the public via social media.

This is just one example of how the digital revolution has radically altered the ecosystem within which sports journalists – and journalists generally – gather and distribute sports news (Knight and Cook, 2015). The growth of Twitter and other channels of digital communication means that traditional media organisations no longer filter and control the flow of sports information with as much control as they once did, and in that sense they have lost their privileged position of determining what constitutes sports news. Moreover, new digital communication channels mean sports clubs and sports stars can communicate directly with their fans without having to use journalists as an intermediary. And fans, of course, can produce their own content too via blogs and social media accounts. This has sometimes been referred to as the "democratisation" of news, and sports media academics have attempted to capture this by saying that the traditional "sports media hierarchy," according to which sports journalists distributed content to their audiences in a top-down fashion, has been "flattened" (Gibbs and Haynes, 2013).

As described above, media departments of sports clubs and sports organisations seek to control the flow of

information surrounding their club or organisation. Those clubs' athletes have often received media training in order to help them bat away tricky questions in face-to-face and phone interviews, and it is often claimed that sports stars' interviews are full of platitudes – or, to put it more directly, plain dull. The media departments of sports clubs seek to deliver positive messages via social media platforms, but social media can also be fertile ground for stories when athletes "go rogue" and post their own sincerely held views on social media, possibly in the heat of the moment. This combing of social media platforms for nuggets of information which could form the basis of a story is termed "information accident reporting" by Hutchins and Rowe, according to which reporters wait to pounce on crumbs that drop from the table. It is worth quoting their thoughts in detail, as it captures well the convoluted and changing way in which "sports news" can emerge:

> Sports journalists search for information accidents, while athletes, publicists and sports organisations seek to avoid them. This is a strategic media game played in a round-the-clock digital sport and news environment. Journalists comb through voluminous messages on Twitter, Facebook, and blogs searching for content that may provide the basis – no matter how slim – for a story that would otherwise go unreported. This is a digital search for disagreements and disclosures that elicit responses from the subject of stories. It is also an example of an almost ineradicable schism that exists between the individual right and ability of sportspeople to express themselves publicly, and the determination of leagues and clubs to exercise tight control over media comment and self-expression in order to keep unwanted stories out of the news […] Information accident reporting by journalists is producing numerous stories of uneven news value, including claims of personal animosity between teammates and opponents, athlete outrage at official decisions, complaints about playing conditions, and serious matters such as the adequacy of security arrangements at tournaments.
>
> (Hutchins and Rowe, 2012: 90)

An early example of this was Samoa rugby player Eliota Fuimaono-Sapolu's extraordinary use of Twitter in 2011. The comments made by Fuimaono-Sapolu on the social media platform gave sports journalists plenty to write about, and also earned him punishment from World Rugby (then the International Rugby Board) and the Rugby Football Union. During that year's Rugby World Cup, the Samoan took to Twitter to accuse a referee of bias and racism, and described Samoa's tournament schedule as having similarities to slavery, apartheid and the Holocaust. Following a league match between his club, Gloucester, and Premiership rivals Saracens, he then used his Twitter account to accuse opponent Owen Farrell of "FAKE toughness you p**** s***." A season earlier, Fuiamaono-Sapolu had also abused Farrell following a match with a less-than- tasteful critique of his play: "Farrell put more bombs (high kicks) on us than the U.S. did on Osama Bin Laden. Genocide" (Gallagher, 2011). Writing stories based on such tasteless and abusive outbursts is a legitimate activity for sports journalists. In Fuiamaono-Sapolu's case, reporting on his comments and the fallout from them was in the public interest as his remarks had a bearing on the standing in which rugby is held by the wider public. However, journalists should be wary of becoming hooked on being drip-fed content via social media, as addictive as it might be. It is a largely passive form of sports newsgathering, and it should not trump more active, traditional newsgathering techniques such as getting out and about and looking people in the eye rather than looking at their tweets on a screen.

So, we might tentatively suggest, then, that while sports news is still *selected and shaped* to an extent by editors and journalists, it is also increasingly selected and shaped by audiences and sports clubs. It is also shaped by sports stars themselves, who can take to the social media platform of their choice to communicate directly with thousands – sometimes millions – of fans. (This can be horrifically misguided and self-defeating, of course. One example was American swimmer Ryan Lochte posting an incriminating photo of himself receiving an intravenous drip in May 2018. Having seen the photo on Lochte's Instagram account, the US Anti-Doping Agency investigated and discovered that the 12-time Olympic medallist had taken an amount of Vitamin B that exceeded permitted levels and banned him from competing for 14 months.) In an inter- active, social-media driven era, it can be the "audience" itself or sports stars themselves who drive the news agenda by making certain facts go viral.

Profile – David Walsh

David Walsh, chief sports writer for *The Sunday Times*, is best known for his fearless investigative work exposing the cheating of American cyclist Lance Armstrong. His 13-year investigation culminated in Armstrong being stripped of all seven of his Tour de France titles for doping, and Walsh receiving a number of awards for the quality of his journalism. But the road to those awards was as bumpy as the cobbled streets around the Champs-Élysées, with Walsh being sued for libel by Armstrong. When Walsh received a lifetime achievement award in 2013 for the quality of his journalism, the man presenting him the prize – former Olympic rower Sir Matthew Pinsent – said: "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" (*Sunday Times*, Sport p4, May 5, 2013).

Good journalism is fearless in its pursuit of the truth, and Walsh's work to expose Armstrong as a fraud can be held up as one of the great pieces of long-term, investigative sports journalism. In an article he produced for *Sports Illustrated*, Walsh described the battles he encountered during the course of his investigation. He wrote: "How to prove what you knew, that was the challenge. He (Armstrong) called me 'the worst journalist in the world', referred to me as 'the little fucking troll' […] and, of course, he sued me. That lawsuit now seems as close as you can get to an 'Oscar' in our game. It's been a good journey because the truth was never hard to find in this story. You only had to be interested in looking" (Tinley, 2012). The final sentence here is salutary. Sports journalists – like any journalists – need to look beyond the surface of things; to be prepared to see the deeper issues at play. And to then cover those issues with doggedness and integrity.

Walsh has at times turned his fire on fellow sports journalists as well as on cheating sports stars. Too many sports journalists, he has argued, have been content to stay away from heavy, complex issues such as doping for fear of alienating contacts and jeopardising access to sources. His account of his years exposing Armstrong's drug-taking, *Seven Deadly Sins: My Pursuit of Lance Armstrong* (2012), is an important book, and contains withering assessments of some journalists, whom he effectively accuses of backing off from the big story.

His recollections of covering the 1999 Tour – the first of Armstrong's seven Tour wins – contain some particularly direct criticisms. 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 Union Cycliste Internationale (Walsh, 2012: 88).

Walsh has contended that any attempt to produce sports journalism that does not comply with the imperative of honestly pursuing the truth, regardless of professional cost, is not worth the paper it is written on. This position is conveyed by Walsh in both his own account of his pursuit of 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" (HARDtalk, 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. 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).

However, Walsh, an Irish journalist based in England, has at times had his own professional integrity questioned (McKay, 2010). Such questioning has focused on his acceptance of an offer to live and travel with Team Sky in 2013, an experience which he used as the basis for a number of articles and a book. By being "embedded" with a cycling team in such a way, it was suggested that Walsh was in danger of surrendering the journalistic independence that he had shown through his tenacious coverage of Armstrong, and instead becoming the mouthpiece for an organisation that he should have been reporting on critically (BBC, 2017). Four years later – long after the embedding project with Team Sky was over, and after allegations around Team Sky's medical policies had

emerged – Walsh concluded that he had after all been used. Interviewed by Stephen Sackur for the BBC's HARDtalk show, Walsh said he had been "duped" by Team Sky's director, Dave Brailsford (HARDtalk, 2017).

Walsh's decision to accept the offer to live with Team Sky as a means of gaining journalistic access raises 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 equivalent to – or close to – cheerleading or collusion. The second, more general, area is around the long-standing question about the distance that should ideally exist between sports journalists and the people and teams they are reporting on. Should sports journalists, for example, share a flight with a team they are covering? Should they have a beer with them? If so, how many? Walsh has argued that his time with Team Sky did not involve him breaking his ethical principles (Walsh, 2013), while also conceding – as the "dupe" claim suggests – that he was to an extent manipulated (HARDtalk, 2017).

Walsh's career is an informative case study in the ethical issues confronting sports journalists, and his relentless work covering Armstrong is an example of what young sports journalists should aspire to. Walsh himself regards his pursuit of Armstrong as not only career defining but also life defining. "I know that when I'm on my deathbed and somebody asks: did you ever do anything as a journalist you were proud of, I would say only one thing: Lance Armstrong" (Pugh, 2012a). And while his pursuit of Armstrong had its pressures and frustrations and was at times all consuming, Walsh has said it was professionally invigorating. As he told the BBC's HARDtalk programme: "I never saw it as a sacrifice […] My feeling all the time was this was the most fun I was ever going to have as a journalist […] It wasn't horrible, I never felt more journalistically alive as I was during those years" (HARDtalk, 2017: 9.40–10.04).

It is not only through social media channels that sports stars can seek to convey their thoughts and perspectives directly. *The Players' Tribune* (www.theplayerstribune.com), for example, is a sports news website with a difference: all the content is written exclusively under the name of sports stars themselves. While columns written under the byline of a high-profile sports-person are not new and have indeed been a staple of British newspapers for a number of decades, to *only* have content by them represents a point of departure. The Players' Tribune project was founded in 2014 by a former baseball star, New York Yankees shortstop Derek Jeter, in conjunction with sports marketing businessman Jaymee Messler. Their aim was to give professional athletes a platform on which they could publish their own stories. Initially, athletes were even given journalistic job titles, with the Boston Red Sox's David Ortiz, for example, the editor-at-large (Barshad, 2018). Stories began to be broken on the site, notably when Kobe Bryant announced his retirement from basketball via a poem on the website called "Dear Basketball" (Bryant, 2015). The content on the site is ghostwritten by experienced writers, but the final say on what is published rests with the sports star whose name is at the top of the article. During an interview in 2018, the company's chief executive, Jeff Levick, formerly of music streaming service Spotify, described the website as a platform for "athlete-generated content," prompting the journalist who interviewed him to comment: "The site gives its subjects final approval of their own coverage. Normally, this would be a journalistic sin, were it not for an elegant and cynical workaround: giving the subject the byline" (Barshad, 2018).

Is this journalism, or is it anti-journalism? To some working in the sports media, the concept of so-called athlete-generated content being mentioned in the same breath as journalism is enough to send a chill down the spine. The presence of a site such as *The Players' Tribune* is arguably another aspect of the modern sports media landscape that suggests sports journalists have lost their role as the custodians and purveyors of sports news. According to this line of thinking, a site such as *The Players' Tribune* is just another way in which highly paid and highly marketed sports stars get the chance to burnish their own carefully crafted public image even further. In an extended piece in *The New York Times* reflecting on the website, journalist Amos Barshad put it like this: "Perhaps *The Players' Tribune* can be best understood as an effort by athletes to seize that most precious contemporary commodity – the narrative" (Barshad, 2018). However, this is arguably a form of professional surrender by journalists. Journalism should, on one traditional school of thinking, be independent

and as objective as possible, which means not peddling the lines that sports stars want you to peddle. Perhaps the presence of sites such as *The Players' Tribune* indirectly serves as a call to arms for sports journalists to be more active and independent than ever. Rather than taking the remarks of players in heavily ghostwritten columns at face value, sports journalists should provide a critique of those sports stars and the issues they raise. Instead of making sports journalists obsolete, there is a strong case for arguing that *The Players' Tribune* makes independent, rigorous sports news reporting more important than ever; otherwise, we run the risk of sports stars' choreographed statements becoming the dominant sports news.

Sourcing and selecting stories

Where do sports journalists get their stories from? As with news journalists, it can be helpful to make the initial broad distinction of "on-diary" and "off-diary" stories (Andrews, 2014: 23). On-diary stories are those which are literally on the sports desk's diary: match fixtures, athletics meetings, mid-week press conferences, the date of an impending World Anti-Doping Agency media briefing. Off-diary, in contrast, refers to stories that reporters are able to gather at times when they do not have specific diary events to attend at the sports desk's command. So, this could mean meeting up with a sports club executive over coffee to get background information about a hot topic, or ringing around contacts to see if they are aware of any simmering stories that could be coming to the boil. Or it might mean making contact with the author of an interesting comment you have spotted on Twitter and seeing if they would be happy to speak over the phone. More recently, Kozman has referred to the "story channel" when attempting to classify the origin of sports stories, breaking the channels down into "routine" (stories arising from a reporter's "beat" – or specialism – and which are primarily scheduled events, such as press conferences and post-match interviews) and "non-routine," which she describes as "mainly based on original, creative reporting" (Kozman, 2017: 52). So, gathering quotes from a manager at a press conference in order to write a preview for a forthcoming match would fall under the category of "routine." Spending time investigating allegations of doping within a particular sport, by contrast, would be non-routine. Another form of non-routine sports journalism is what is sometimes referred to as *participatory journalism*. This is where a sports journalist, in order to gain first-hand insight into a sport, actually takes part in that sport, perhaps by training with a particular club or even competing. Arguably the best exponent of this form of journalism was the mid-to-late-twentieth-century American writer George Plimpton. Plimpton wrote about a range of sporting experiences, including a three-round exhibition bout he had with the then-world light-heavyweight champion Archie Moore, and a stint as a rookie quarterback with the Detroit Lions during the team's summer training camp (Homberger, 2003). This form of sports journalism is unorthodox and unusual, and might be inadvisable for those more accustomed to availing themselves of the pre-match hospitality in media centres. But it is a good antidote to desk- and screen-bound sports journalists sitting in air-conditioned newsrooms merely scrolling through social media feeds in the hope of finding something newsy.

Making the news

This chapter began by posing a fundamental question about sports media: what elevates certain facts about sport into sports news? Even more fundamentally it can be asked, what is news? Since a groundbreaking study in the mid-1960s by two Norwegian academics (Galtung and Ruge, 1965), it has been hypothesised that there are a certain number of *news values* that journalists wittingly or unwittingly apply to information when deciding whether it is newsworthy or not. Journalists can in some instances be dismissive of academics' attempts to provide an analysis of the factors that make certain facts newsworthy, suggesting that judgements about what constitutes news are resistant to categorisation, and that a decision about what is newsworthy is self-evident or intuitive – a "gut feeling" – rather than the application (conscious or otherwise) of so-called news values (Schultz, 2007). Nevertheless, as practising sports journalists it is worthwhile for us to consider the prevailing factors that Galtung and Ruge, and more recently Harcup and O'Neill (2001, 2017), have sought to identify as making information *newsworthy*, not least because it makes us more reflective about our

professional practice and some of the activities we perhaps do unthinkingly.

Among the factors that Harcup and O'Neill (2017) identify as making a piece of information – or story – more likely to get published by mainstream British newspapers are *the power elite, relevance, bad news, good news, surprise, celebrity, exclusivity* and *conflict*. This is by no means an exhaustive list of the factors they identify, and it is important to note that their content analysis did not look at the papers' sports news pages but only the news pages. However, it is useful to consider whether and how they apply in a sports context. *The power elite* criterion states that a story is more likely to get published if it is about powerful individuals or organisations. In sport, we may think here of how a story about the International Olympic Committee or the head of FIFA is more likely to be selected than a story about less powerful people and institutions. *Relevance* refers to "stories about groups or nations perceived to be influential with, or culturally or historically familiar to, the audience." In this regard, we may think of how British sports media audiences are more likely to be interested in sports from the United States given the ties between the two nations than, say, sports from South East Asia. This makes stories about American sport more likely to be selected to appear in British news outlets than articles about Vietnamese sport. *Bad news, good news, surprise* and *celebrity* are self-explanatory criteria, while *exclusivity* refers to whether the story the outlet has is unique to it. If it is – if no other news organisation has it – then the exclusive nature of the story bolsters its news value and makes it more likely to be selected for publication. An exclusive interview with a baseball star just banned for a doping offence would be an example here. *Conflict* refers to controversies, arguments and break-ups. If a footballer falls out with the manager of his club and the pair comes to fisticuffs on the training ground, then that conflict makes the story newsworthy.

In their more recent study (2017), Harcup and O'Neill considered how news values had evolved in the digital age since their original study (2001). In the wake of the changes in news consumption brought about by the digital revolution, they concluded that *shareability* (stories that are likely to trigger sharing on social media) and the amount of *audio-visual* material available to illustrate a story were now key news values. In terms of defining shareability more precisely, they admit the term is nebulous but suggest that a necessary condition of shareability is that it provokes some form of an emotional response, such as anger or amusement. In providing an updated list of news values, they conclude that in order to be selected, "news stories must generally satisfy one and prefer- ably more" of their criteria (Harcup and O'Neill, 2017: 1482).

A point that can be drawn from this is that the factors or variables that make something news are not set in tablets of stone. While there are some constant factors, decisions about what is news vary from place to place and time to time. As technology changes, arguably so does the definition of what is newsworthy. A generation brought up snacking on a diet of memes, GIFs and podcasts on their mobile phones is likely to digest – and want – a different menu of content to those of an earlier generation brought up with the routines of newspaper reading and regular bulletin watching. News, as one media academic puts it, is "defined by a shifting set of practices, informal and often implicit agreements about proper conduct, style, and form […] those practices are in flux; multiple, debatable, and open for reconsideration" (Baym, 2010: 375). Moreover, packaging information as "the news" is a way of taming the world of events; of bringing order to the chaos of information that surrounds us. As Baym adds, "News has always been a particular kind of narrative art, one that arranges the events of the phenomenal world into neatly defined stories – dramatic tales rich with heroes and villains, conflict and suspense" (2010: 375). And the act of reporting on something is arguably in and of itself an act that distorts the thing that is reported. By reading or watching a particular report, the audience's perceptions of the world shift, and shift according to the emphasis and focus that the report has. "Reality is necessarily manipulated when events and people are relocated into news or prime-time stories. The media can impose their own logic on assembled materials in a number of ways, including emphasizing behaviours and people and stereotyping" (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996: 37).

When he wrote the words quoted in the preceding paragraph, Baym was concerned with news stories generally, not just sports news stories. However, sport is an area of human life and popular culture that is arguably without rival when it comes to "dramatic tales rich with heroes and villains, conflict and suspense." It is an arena of life that provides the full array of characters and emotions. As such, it arguably provides journalists with one of the richest seams from which to mine engaging stories and news. As one sports-journalist-turned-academic has put it, "With its daily dose of breath-taking winners and gallant losers, trailblazers and exemplars, cheats and leeches, what more could a writer possibly wish for in a subject?" (Steen, 2014: 2).

Yet lurking beneath all of this is another question: What should be the proper subject matter of sports journalism? Is it the weekly staples of match previews, interview-based profiles, match reports and match analysis? Or should it be deeper, more "significant" content – content like investigations into corruption at governing bodies, or investigations into doping within elite sport? One answer is that sports journalism can be both. This is the view of Nick Harris, the chief sports correspondent at UK title the *Mail on Sunday*. Speaking on The Media Show, a weekly BBC Radio 4 programme that is essential listening for students of the media in the United Kingdom, Harris argued that the role is multifaceted, and that sports news comes in different guises. "As in any branch of media, people have their specialisms, so you have people who are focused on a particular patch and particular clubs, they'll be doing day-to-day news, transfer news, injury news, covering matches, that kind of thing," he said. "I happen to specialise in investigative journalism, so I'm doing, you know, investigative work. It's not everybody's job to cover everything and actually I think you find, increasingly, a general football reporter has to know a bit more than they used to know about football finance and football economics and football business, and given the amount of corruption in club ownership and issues like that, more reporters are covering more different topics in more depth" (The Media Show, BBC Radio 4, 2018).

Not all journalists who produce sports news take Harris' broad view. The investigative journalist Andrew Jennings, for example, argues that UK sports journalists are too concerned with the merry-go-round of press conferences and matches to really get under the skin of sport and thereby tackle the big questions. Jennings, who has published books and presented BBC investigations into FIFA corruption, has repeated his indictment of sports journalists over a number of years. In a 2010 interview with the industry magazine the *Press Gazette* headlined "Andrew Jennings: We have world's worst sports reporters," he was quoted as saying:

> Why haven't our reporters spent all this time turning them (FIFA) over? There are some very good reporters around but they don't seem to work in sports news […] It's time editors started looking at the garbage that you get from sports news reporters. They are probably the worst in the world, they won't check, they won't research and they won't cultivate the sources that you need to get the documents that reveal what is really going on.
>
> (Ponsford, 2010)

Jennings turned the guns on his journalist peers once again in another *Press Gazette* interview, this time in 2015. While acknowledging the strong reporting done by *The Sunday Times*' Insight team, which won the 2015 Paul Foot Award for its investigations into Qatar's bid to host the 2022 World Cup, Jennings saw little else to praise in the way the UK media had covered corruption at FIFA, and also allowed himself a swipe at two institutions of British journalism, the BBC and *The Guardian*:

> Let's be clear: in the UK, the only journalism has been me and my colleagues at *Panorama* and our friends at Insight […] The BBC needs to examine its catastrophically bad reporting of FIFA corruption […] When did *Guardian Sport* ever break a story?
>
> (Turvill, 2015)

For Jennings, the majority of activities conducted by media professionals who call themselves sports journalists are simply not journalism at all. Writing match previews and reports are not, as he sees it, activities deserving of the name journalism.

> This journalism business is easy, you know. You just find some disgraceful, disgustingly corrupt people and you work on it! You have to. That's what we do. The rest of the media gets far too cosy with them. It's wrong.
>
> (Miller, 2015)

A journalist who interviewed Jennings for the *Washington Post* puts it another way. "As other journalists were ball watching – reporting scorelines or writing player profiles – Jennings was digging into the dirty deals underpinning the world's most popular game" (Miller, 2015). This notion of ball-watching is a useful concept and can be elaborated upon to illustrate the different views among sports journalists about just what it is that constitutes sports news. Ball-watching is literally what many sports journalists do; they watch a tennis ball go back and forth over a net, for example, and talk and write about it. Or they watch a ball – usually round, but sometimes oval – be kicked or thrown in a particular way, and talk and write about it. But the claim in Jennings' writing and interviews is that by becoming *too* focused as a sports journalist on where the literal ball is, one figuratively "takes one's eye off the ball." Underlying this would seem to be a tension that confronts every sports journalist. How much time should a sports journalist spend covering what might be termed the

superficial activities of a sport (the on-pitch action) and how much time should a sports journalist spend on "digging under the surface" to reveal the "deep" activities (the matters of governance)? Jennings clearly holds literal ball-watchers in a state of contempt, but that is arguably extreme, unfair and simplistic, given the appetite for information about day-to-day action that exists among sports fans. However, what can certainly be taken from Jennings' assault on what passes for sports news is the point that a press corps that becomes too consumed by the treadmill of literal ball-watching runs the risk of becoming one-dimensional and failing to hold those in positions of power to account.

A leading sports journalist of the twentieth century, Hugh McIlvanney, who retired in 2016 after working for a combined total of 53 years on *The Sunday Times* and *The Observer*, described sport as "our magnificent triviality" (Mitchell 2016). On this understanding, sport is trivial in that it does not concern life and death matters in the way that "hard" current affairs news does, but magnificent insofar as it serves as a platform on which skill, athleticism and triumph can be performed, witnessed and exalted. A reporter of Jennings' viewpoint might regard this concept of sport as magnificent triviality as misguided, even dangerous. Indeed, he might argue that such an attitude is what leads to ball-watching and a failure to pay attention to the "serious" or hard issues underpinning sports and its governance. Ball-watching is therefore a useful concept, forcing sports journalists to think hard about just how much match reporting is good for their professional soul.

Case study

James Pearce has one of the most sought-after jobs in British sports journalism, reporting on one of the biggest clubs in the world in one of the most football-obsessed cities in the world.

But since taking on the role of Liverpool FC reporter for the respected daily title the *Liverpool Echo* in 2011, Pearce says the role has changed hugely as the digital era has prompted the *Echo* to further shift its focus from print to www.liverpoolecho.co.uk.

He is active across Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter, using the social media platforms to interact with supporters and engage with a younger audience. On Twitter alone, Pearce has more than 400,000 followers – more than 11 times the paper's daily circulation, which as of August 2018, was officially put at just over 35,000 (Linford, 2018)

Social media represents something of a double-edged sword in Pearce's eyes, and sports journalists need to develop the ability to ignore the personal criticism and abuse that can be directed their way by trolls and aggrieved sports fans.

"Social media represents one of the biggest ways in which sports journalism has changed," he says. "It's such an important part of the job now to interact with fans, primarily on Twitter. On a daily basis you get abuse about various things and you have to have a thick skin to deal with that. With Liverpool being such a big club and having so many supporters, you get accused of having agendas here, there and everywhere. Sometimes fans don't want to believe that something is true and that can prompt a barrage."

When he first began the role, Pearce would have a daily chat with the subeditors – the page designers and copy editors – about how many pages of Liverpool FC content they needed from him that day, and that would determine his workload. Now he admits that he barely gives the printed edition much thought, instead directing his energies into feeding the never-ending appetite for online content.

"What's changed more than anything is the immediacy – having to get stuff out there so quickly. I don't have much to do with the putting together of the printed product now, they make a paper out of what's gone online."

The demands of the digital age – the need to be constantly updating the *Echo* website with multimedia content and to be updating social media – can be onerous.

"It can seem that you very rarely have time to craft something. More often than not you're rattling

out something. We now also have video with pretty much every interview we do, and podcasts that I do two or three times a week.

"It's almost a never-ending cycle of getting stuff out there. There's such a thirst for content and it's making sure standards don't slip. I'd rather be second and right with a story than first and wrong."

For Pearce, the nurturing and preservation of strong contacts is vital. He is acutely aware of the balance that needs to be struck between being an independent journalist who won't be cowed by the club, and being diplomatic and at times flexible with the club for the sake of preserving its good will.

"In this day and age, a lot of websites have gone down the route of thinking that you don't really need those relationships with clubs – that you're almost better off being able to say exactly what you want when you want. But although it's more difficult, I think it's more rewarding and beneficial to try and tread that tightrope of reporting and commenting objectively but at the same time retaining those relationships. It's helped that Liverpool have usually been pretty good to deal with. They are not that touchy to criticism. People at the club from the board down have always said that if it's fair opinion or factually correct, then it's very rare to get a phone call from the club."

Walking that tightrope can be particularly difficult when the story is a potential exclusive about a player transfer.

"It can be a dilemma when you get information about new signings," says Pearce. "I had information about one signing that I'd got from a source and when I spoke to the club to get it double-sourced I was told it would go down like a lead balloon if I ran the story. The club was also in negotiations with another player at the same time and they were concerned the price for that player would go up if the story went out. My response was, ok, so if I sit tight on this for a few days what other stories can I have in return? Sometimes it's a trade-off."

Pearce recalls another occasion in which he had to decide whether to publish a story and incur the club's anger, or hold off in the hope of obtaining the club's favour and gaining the inside track on some other stories. Through his sources, Pearce had gathered that the club could be moving from Melwood, its long-standing training base, to a new site. However, the purchase of the land for the new training facility had not been completed, and the club was concerned that the seller could pull out if the story of the relocation appeared in the media, and the club appeared that they were taking the purchase of the land for granted.

"Sometimes you decide you can't sit on a story because it will come out via another media outlet," says Pearce, who emphasises that it is essential to him that the club's bosses know he is an independent journalist whose first duty is to his readers, not to them. "Sometimes you have to play the long game."

"When I first took the job I was told to regard the role as being like a critical friend – you hold them to account when you need to, but there are times when they need a bit of support."

Pearce says that relationships with managers are inevitably different from manager to manager. He enjoyed a close relationship with Brendan Rodgers, who was Liverpool's manager from 2012 to 2015, but admits that he has not got as close to Rodgers' successor, Jürgen Klopp.

"With Brendan Rodgers I'd have half an hour with him in his office most weeks, and about 50 per cent of what he said was on the record and 50 per cent of it wasn't. I don't think Klopp really sees that distinction between local and national reporter. It's been tough at times. What makes it manageable is that all the journalists covering the club are in the same boat. I'm not aware of any journalist having got his personal mobile number. With Brendan Rodgers, I could text or call him if anything happened during the week. The only one-on-one interviews I get with Klopp are maybe when I go on pre-season camps with the club."

Infotainment and sportainment

Do sports audiences want news, or do they want entertainment? Perhaps they want a hybrid of the two: *infotainment*. A more fundamental question, building on the above discussion of Jennings and ball-watching, could be posed: is sports journalism about news or entertainment? One response is that the two aren't mutually exclusive. Good sports journalism should simultaneously be able to both inform as well as entertain. One example of this is Stephen Jones, *The Sunday Times*' long-serving and multi-award-winning rugby correspondent; a writer whose knowledge of the game is sometimes only exceeded by his ability to stir up (always entertaining) controversy through the publication of colourfully expressed opinion. Providing pleasure to the reader has been the goal of some of the most distinguished sportswriters down the decades in different parts of the globe. The mid-twentieth-century American sports columnist Red Smith, for example, wrote that providing his readers with pleasure and entertainment was to him an important aspect of his journalistic activity (Steen, 2014: 30).

However, if journalism is primarily the gathering and then the dissemination to an audience of information that they were previously unaware of, then sports journalism is primarily about news. But sport audiences of course want to be entertained, and there are times when entertainment now seems to be the primary function of some sports journalism. Entertainment can come in different guises: it can come in the form of an amusing GIF that perhaps ridicules a football player's dive; it could be a provocative piece of punditry issued during a podcast or radio phone-in; or it might be a quiz on football website *Squawka*. The balance between information and entertainment appears to have shifted. As has been observed, for sports journalists "the priority was set in stone long ago: inform, then, if space and/or time permit, entertain. The weight of emphasis, if not completely reversed, has certainly altered" (Steen, 2014: 53). However, is there anything wrong with the news being entertaining – or indeed being entertainment? Indeed, can a meaningful distinction be made between "serious" news and entertaining news? Not all scholars think so. Baym, for example, argues that "the dividing line between news and entertainment is fundamentally porous, if not entirely arbitrary, and difficult to define with any meaningful measure of precision" (2010: 376). A related question is whether it makes sense to speak of sports news as being distinct from other forms of news. The traditional layout and structure of newspapers and television bulletins – with sport on the back pages and towards the end of the bulletin respectively – suggests a clear boundary. But it could be argued that sports news no longer belongs in such ghettos, primarily because the complementary growth of professional sport and celebrity culture has made sport transcend the back pages and the tail-end of bulletins. As a trio of distinguished writers about sports journalism have put it:

> The rise of celebrity culture means that sports stars appear more often in other sections of the media – in fashion shoots, gossip columns, show business, celebrity profiles, chat and game shows. The sheer scale of the sports business has made it a subject for the financial and business sections of the print media. The intense focus on mega events such as the World Cup and the Olympic Games transcends the narrow boundaries of the sports section. Sport as a subject has found itself spreading beyond the confines of sports journalism and, indeed, beyond the territory of sports journalists themselves.
>
> (Boyle, Rowe and Whannel, 2010: 250)

The type of sports journalism that focuses solely on the daily flow of build-ups to big games, post-match debate and a sprinkling of big-name interviews has been referred to as the "sportainment" model, according to which sports reporting is viewed as effectively being just a branch of entertainment (Hardin, Zhong and Whiteside, 2009: 336). On this understanding, the pejorative description of the sports desk as being the "toy department" of the newsroom is viewed as justified. This perspective on sports journalism arguably takes as its basis the perception that sports journalism itself is close to fandom (McEnnis, 2017), with sports journalists themselves closely associated in interests and outlook to fans themselves. This view of the nature of sports journalism content goes some way to account for how three of the best-known names to have written academically about sports journalism have written that "the sports section is not generally seen as prestigious within the culture of news and journalism" (Boyle, Rowe and Whannel, 2010: 245). Is this a statement that should make the sports journalist feel uncomfortable? Maybe not uncomfortable, but it should certainly make the sports journalist think.

Sportainment and infotainment are concepts that have been used by sports media academics when analysing the nature of sports content in the early twenty-first century. An important additional concept to consider

alongside them is one that sports editors themselves have been using, and that is *fan-led*. An experienced regional sports editor working for Reach, a major publisher of sports news in the United Kingdom, gave an articulate and powerful insight into the nature of fan-led content during an interview for this book. Fan-led is arguably an approach that supersedes the more traditional approach of thinking in terms of news values, and is driven by the pressure for sports journalists to generate strong viewing figures for their material. It is also an approach that requires a high level of interaction by sports journalists with supporters, as the following lengthy excerpt from our interview illustrates:

> I think "fan-led" is a term that's used a lot. What do fans want to see? What do they want to read? What's the issue that's winding them up? It can be anything from why a team is wearing a certain colour on a certain day to things about FIFA to things about wrestling. A guy that I used to work with on football is now covering World Wrestling Entertainment for Sky. That's just incredible really when you think about it; it's not really a sport, it's sport entertainment. But news organisations are probably investing a lot more time, money and effort into that than they are in things like golf and tennis because there's the demand for it. Instead of just chucking stories at people you've now got to almost be part of a conversation with supporters all the time. Live blogs, web chats, Facebook Lives, Periscopes – you can create a lot of content just on fan opinion and what fans are talking about. It's almost like understanding the trending topics about the club you're covering and tailoring your content towards that. As a sports journalist, you have to go straight in and you're expected to produce page views on day one. The best way to do that is interactive fan-led content and to engage with people. So you're the sort of hub of all that, all that chat and all that debate and all those issues – the audience will come to you to find out what you make of it. It can't just be a one-way thing now. With newspapers before digital, the decision to include content would be purely based on what editors thought was a good story – put it in the paper and hope that people want to buy it. Now, you're constantly looking at what people want. There's no hiding place for content that isn't performing.
>
> (2018, interview with the authors)

We can distil two key – and related – features of this fan-led approach to news selection. First, a key factor in determining what constitutes sports news is now what the audience wants, and understanding just what audiences want is done through analysing the viewing figures for each piece of online content. Secondly, the role of the journalist here is akin to stimulating and then pre- siding over a debate – interaction with supporters is key in order both to get debate going and then sustaining that debate. As such, sports journalism is no longer an aloof activity. The decisions about what to include as sports news are based on real-time viewer figures, and generating positive audience figures is done through high levels of activity and engagement with supporters through social media.

This approach finds a form of echo in the thinking of Steve Marshall of BBC Sport. Marshall appreciates now that the BBC needs to provide a form of con- tent that is attuned to audience-viewing data and which reflects readers' cultural reference points. "One thing that analytics and audience data show is that young people like not just Premier League football but European football and there's been a drive to do more European football. Why do youngsters like European football? Well, probably because they're playing with teams like Real Madrid and Bayern Munich on computer games like FIFA; those teams have become more prominent in their everyday world" (Steve Marshall, 2018 interview with authors). Sports news may still be something that sports journalists select and shape, but there is more focus than ever by the sports desk on understanding – and then tailoring content – to what audiences want. It is perhaps a rather crude formulation, but whereas prior to the digital revolution it was sports journalists who led fans in terms of news selection, it is now fans who – to a significant extent – lead sports journalists.

Celebrity, sensationalism and "soft" news

When making decisions about what stories to publish or broadcast, sports editors are more likely to be interested in a piece if it involves a "big" name (preferably with a large financial figure attached to it – such as a multi-million-pound transfer fee or astronomical weekly wage). Celebrity, as defined by Harcup and O'Neill, is therefore a key consideration when determining a sport story's newsworthiness. Although this might come as no surprise when considering the output of tabloid newspapers – news providers which have long been sustained by a diet of celebrity-propelled content – it is also true of so-called quality newspapers. Indeed, it can be argued that a cult of celebrity dominates in much sports journalism, with cult figures (A-list sports

stars) protected by carefully managed media choreography that affords mere mortals (the media and their audiences) just the briefest of glimpses of the glorious athletes. Boyle and Haynes have argued that access to sports stars has been "routinized and sanitized" through processes such as the post-match flash interview, and connect this to what they claim is the superficial focus of much sports journalism content. In a distinctly downbeat assessment of mainstream sports journalism's ability to engage with deep issues, they argue:

> More considered star profiles are commonly based on opinion and sensationalism rather than reflective analysis and long-form interviews are placed and managed by agents and publicists as part of a wider marketing function. In this rather glib, gloomy version of contemporary sports journalism, investigative approaches to sport are increasingly rare. There are exceptions, such as investigations of match-fixing, performance-enhancing drugs, corruption in the governance of sport and financial irregularities. The subject competence of sports journalists in some of these areas, including sports finance, is often found wanting, as they step into areas of expertise beyond their comfort zone. So the "bread and butter" of sports journalism remains soft news stories based on quotes from press conferences or press releases, with additional gossip thrown in from a network of sources.
>
> (Boyle and Haynes, 2013: 207)

In a way, this is Andrew Jennings' perspective redressed and reinforced in academic clothing. What it underscores is the importance of sports journalists reflecting on the type of news they are seeking to gather and publish. Are they satisfied to stay in the realm of sportainment, or do they want to aim for more "reflective" and "investigative approaches" in addition to this?

Uniformity and diversity of sports news

Surf from website to website or browse the back pages, and it is often the case that mainstream sports outlets have very similar output to that of their rivals. They tend to cover broadly the same set of sports, and will often follow the same angles on certain stories (English, 2014). Based on research of six quality titles and their online output in the United Kingdom, Australia and India, English argues that competition between titles actually leads to uniformity of content. Such standardised content, he contends, "is a major element of contemporary sports journalism coverage in print and online, both through the practice of follow-ups and journalists making news decisions similar to those of their competitors" (English, 2014: 491). One journalist at *The Guardian* "complained that the web, which was supposed to encourage diversity, had 'crushed the variety of tone' and resulted in 'bland' offerings" (English 2014: 485). Paradoxically, then, the Internet – a place with infinite room for content – has arguably fostered a narrowing, or uniformity, of sports news content. This could be connected to Whannel's concept of vortextuality, which he describes as the rapid and constant feeding off each other by the purveyors of digital information (Whannel, 2002: 206).

One of the reasons that a similarity of content can occur between rival publications is that the reporters from the main outlets tend to roam in a *press pack*. At the end of a press conference, they will often *carve up* the interview among themselves and decide what the main angle is, and what content they might hold back for another day. "With a remarkable degree of homogeneity, the mainstream media ape one another each day, relying on the same narrowly articulated understanding of 'news value' to report on a largely identical set of topics" (Baym, 2010: 377). Institutionalised processes of story selection can also inhibit the variety of items that receive coverage. Galtung and Ruge's (1965) analysis of news values highlighted the mainstream Western media's bias towards reporting elite First World countries, elite people and items that fitted in with outlets' production schedules. It could be hypothesised that this paradigm applies to sports journalism output, too. It has been argued that there is a "consensual news value system operating throughout the mainstream media, with only a limited range of opinions permitted, particularly at times of crisis" (Keeble, 2009: 22). Although Keeble is addressing news journalism here, the point can apply to sport too. Sports journalists need to be wary of merely following the pack; sometimes the best sports journalism arises from being the lone wolf who pursues prey that everyone else overlooks for softer targets, or in being the columnist who is prepared to be the only one to voice a contrary and unpopular opinion. As such, a diverse, pluralistic media containing outlets that are prepared to stray from the mainstream perspective can inject important lifeblood into sports journalism and give an added breadth to what constitutes the sports news. In the United States, deadspin.com is an example of such a website, with the site at times using a stridently informal tone to cover stories and address

issues that are often overlooked by more traditional media. Such websites are also an antidote to what has been called *churnalism*, which is the lazy repackaging of information that has been issued by a sports club or governing body as news. The recycling of other outlets' content is also churnalism (Davies, 2008), and it is a phenomenon that has been accentuated by the growth of digital media and the consequent ease with which others' content can be found and then copied and pasted. It has been argued that sports journalism is ridden with this form of lazy, complacent churnalism (Boyle and Haynes, 2013: 207), and is it not too controversial a statement to say that all self-respecting sports journalists should seek to gather their own sports news and spurn the churn.

Truth, virality and clickbait

It has been argued by a British newspaper editor that in a "post-truth" culture propelled by social media, the currency of online information is no longer truth but virality (Viner, 2016). In other words, people seek to publish content that will be popular and gain a reaction – go viral – rather than communicate accurate, truthful information. Audience engagement (by which is meant high unique visitor numbers and the sharing of content) becomes the altar on which "good" journalism is potentially sacrificed. On this understanding, what engages people online and prompts them to consume and share content is not its veracity (truthfulness) but its "affective" – or emotional – power (Hermida, 2016). This leads to the propagation – unwittingly, but sometimes wittingly – of misinformation in an era in which "facts become secondary to feeling; expertise and vision to ersatz emotional connection" (Smith, 2016). Truth is in some instances relegated to being an optional extra. In sports news, an example might be the publication of a speculative story about a big-name football transfer, even when the only source for the story is the player's agent who has a vested interest in ramping up demand for his player. The journalist writing such a story might have reservations about its accuracy but might be tempted to publish it anyway on the grounds that the player's profile guarantees that the story will be popular and "get a reaction" and "gain a lot of hits."

Truth is also in danger of being undermined by clickbait, an online phenomenon in which readers are enticed to click through to an article only to find it bears a disappointingly loose connection to how it has been promoted. In an analysis examining the Twitter feeds of 15 major football media outlets between 2010 and 2017, Cable and Mottershead carried out a thorough analysis of clickbait in the UK sports media. They concluded that quality is being undermined as outlets pursue "a never-ending quest for easy content" in which "attractive headlines trump journalistic content" (2018a: 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. "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, 2018a: 78). The question arises, however, about how dependent the audience has already become on a diet of such tasty morsels, and whether they can be weaned off it.

Case study: reporting sporting tragedies

It has been often been suggested by critics of the profession that the routines and preoccupations of sports journalists make them ill-prepared for reporting hard news stories and tragic events. The evidence suggests otherwise. Consider the pressure David Lacey and his Fleet Street colleagues were under when they had to file their match reports from the 1985 European Cup Final between Liverpool and Juventus. These are the first three paragraphs from Lacey's report from the Heysel stadium:

"Liverpool lost the European Cup to Juventus last night, but the game of football has lost far, far more. In short, it died along with the 47 people trampled to death when a group of mainly Italian supporters stampeded to get away from rioting Liverpool fans and were crushed when first barriers, and then a wall, collapsed.

After the scenes of death, injury and destruction in the Heysel Stadium in Brussels, the result seems

irrelevant, the details meaningless. How can a match be anything else when even as the players are winning their tackles, making their passes and producing their shots, the death toll continues to mount?

After the wretched affair had ended with the Juventus team doing a hurried half-lap of honour with the trophy, news came through that all 11 members of the Anderlecht youth team who had taken part in the warm-up game had perished." (Lacey, 1985)

Although it later transpired that the 11 members of the youth team had not died and the final death toll was 39, Lacey's first edition match report remains an important historical document and a reminder of the pressures sports journalists can face when a routine sporting event becomes anything but routine. Some Fleet Street newspapers decided not to publish a match report at all that evening.

The helicopter crash at Leicester City Football Club, October 2018.

Recounting his experience of covering the helicopter crash at Leicester City in October 2018, Rob Dorsett, Midlands Correspondent for Sky Sports News (SSN), explains some of the challenges he and colleagues encountered during the immediate aftermath and the days that followed.

When the helicopter came down outside the King Power Stadium on Saturday, October 27, 2018, killing club chairman Vichai Srivaddhanaprabha, the pilot and three other passengers, Dorsett was still in the press room, having completed the usual post-match interviews and news conferences:

"I'm still typing things up, sending some emails. My cameraman heads out to put his kit away in the car and 10 minutes later, the West Ham press officer says, 'I've just been round the back where our coach was heading off. It looks like the helicopter has come down' […] We all rush round. I'm ringing my cameraman en route. He says, 'Rob. I'm filming it now'. He was in staff car park E; [the helicopter] came down 80 yards away from him and he was angry with himself for not filming it as it crashed."

Dorsett says they "would never have used the footage anyway," but his cameraman, Dan Cox, was able to get shots of the burning wreckage. "By the time I got there, it was eight to ten minutes after it crashed. It was still in flames." He knew "instinctively" that no one had survived, "because you look at the body language of the emergency services and the only people who were rushing were the fire brigade." Before Cox could get their kit set up for live pictures, Dorsett did his first live broadcast over the phone at approximately 8:45pm, 20 minutes after the crash. It wasn't long before SSN made their first key editorial decision – not to show video of the burning wreckage. "We only showed those pictures for two hours before we took the decision that it was too much," recalls Dorsett. Sky News ran the pictures a lot longer than SSN, illustrating that even within the same media organisation, the approach to this story would be different, reflecting the differing priorities between a news channel and a sports news channel.

As no news organisation knew who was on board the helicopter, the story quickly became problematic as speculation and rumour spread rapidly across social media about who had perished in the crash. Dorsett recalls that: "The social media storm that was happening at the time was extraordinary."

"We were keen not to speculate about who might be on board, even though we knew that Vichai, the chairman, had arrived by helicopter, he always leaves by helicopter and he was at the game. We didn't know who else was on board, and I started speaking to people who I knew at the club and it became clear that his son, the VC, was not on board, neither was Jon Rudkin, the director of football, and so I reported that."

The speculation was not, however, confined to social media. A number of news organisations were to come in for a lot of criticism for the way they were reporting the story. The ipaper's football reporter, Sam Cunningham, suggested that "some media outlets reported the Leicester City helicopter crash like it was a transfer story." He was particularly scathing about the BBC's Saturday evening news bulletin which speculated about whether Leicester City manager, Claude Puel, was

on board, when they did not know whether he was or not. Cunningham wrote: “Is the public’s thirst for details of death so unquenchable and the media – and by this I include traditional and social – so obsessed with breaking the names of the dead that a little patience and accuracy are forgotten?” (inews.co.uk, Monday, October 29, 2018).

Cunningham criticised other media outlets for reporting on Sunday that the chairman’s daughter had died. Dorsett recalls he managed to establish very early on from a contact at the club that this was wrong and reported she was not on board. He says: “In hindsight, I’m pretty comfortable that confirming that people were not on board was factual information we could report,” but he recognises that even this approach could be viewed critically. “Ethically, I was very conscious by ruling out those that weren’t on board, we were also contributing to the speculation, who is on board.” He also acknowledges that it was sometimes difficult getting the phraseology right and admits he wasn’t always sure if he did. On the Saturday night, he recalls reporting: “You have to say, when you look at those pictures, you have to ask the question, whether anyone could survive a crash like that?” Dorsett concedes that “for a news audience, that’s fine, that seems okay, but the [sport] audience we were talking to, who have a relationship with and affection for [Vichai], it is a step too far.”

The biggest ethical debate Dorsett had with his colleagues concerned goalkeeper Kasper Schmeichel. On the night of the accident, Schmeichel, the only player left at the club when the helicopter crashed, ran towards the burning wreckage and the police had to restrain him. “In any other circumstances, I had enough information from two sources to run it,” but after speaking to his editor about the implications for Leicester’s goalkeeper and concerned he would be breaking Schmeichel’s confidence, they agreed that “it’s not the sort of story where we should be running exclusives.”

“So I worked it out this way, where I would ask Claude Puel about it at the [Thursday] press conference […] I asked him directly […] As soon as I asked him that question the whole room fell silent. He basically confirmed it. So that was the Thursday and we could run the story. But again, I wonder if I was a news reporter, would I have waited three days to run the story?

The BBC ran into further trouble on the Monday after the crash when their reporter Dan Roan was caught on camera outside the King Power Stadium saying the Leicester city boss had died with his mistress. The recording went viral and Roan quickly apologised on Twitter, but it led to calls from Leicester City fans for Roan to be sacked.

The following day *The Daily Telegraph* reported that Roan was to be reprimanded by his employers. Their BBC source claimed:

“The BBC have taken a dim view of this. They told him at the outset that the main thing he needed to do was to strike the right tone, and then this happens” (*Daily Telegraph*, October 30, 2018).

Dorsett’s recollection of the helicopter crash underlines the value of the local sports reporter. When the world’s media comes to town they can be invaluable and offer a perspective the newshounds often miss, but despite having a good understanding of Leicester City football club, Dorsett says that even he was taken by surprise by aspects of the story. For example, he had not clearly grasped how close the players were to the owner until he saw how emotional Jamie Vardy, his wife and some other players were when they arrived at the stadium to see the floral tributes. And it was only through interviewing fans that he came to appreciate how close Vichai was to the people of Leicester. This became a feature of a number of Dorsett’s reports, which seemed wholly appropriate for a sports audience.

SSN is sometimes criticised for soft pedalling on certain football stories due to its commercial relationships with the clubs, but here, their sports journalists told a tragic story very much with their audience in mind, treating the bereaved and fans with dignity and giving them a voice to express their grief. Was it at the expense of objective reporting? Certainly, it was cautious and the instinct for exclusives was set aside, but Dorsett and SSN captured the truth about how Leicester City Football Club and its fans coped with their tragedy. What emerges is a “journalism of

attachment," which is arguably what this story required to counter the sensationalism and speculation, gossip and rumour that was rife elsewhere.

On February 25 2019, Dorsett won the Sports Journalists' Association Broadcast Journalist of Year Award for his coverage. The judges said "Rob's work at the Leicester helicopter crash – one of the biggest stories of the year – was quite outstanding. Sensitive, accurate, controlled and dignified, an object lesson in how to report a tragedy" (February 25, 2019).

Spinning and framing stories

By selecting a certain "angle" or "line" to focus on, journalists – sports journalists included – present reality in a certain way. Consciously or unconsciously, the audience is being told that *this* fact is important, or at least more important than others. Stories are "spun" and "framed" in a particular manner, with certain facts and a certain narrative given prominence. Sports journalists need to be aware of this, along with the associated concept of *representation*. Some news organisations can pigeonhole or stereotype certain sportspeople or sports teams, and reinforce that perception with each piece that they do: the Brazilian football team is a team of unparalleled flamboyance and creativity; the golfer Seve Ballesteros was a swashbuckling, fiery Spaniard; football manager José Mourinho is an unpredictable enigma. Sports journalism can, if it is not careful, reduce the participants that it is covering to pantomime villains/goodies, or even examples of lazy stereotypes. One example of this is the British footballer Joey Barton, a professional with a chequered past, including criminal convictions. Somewhat ironically, Barton used a newspaper comment piece to complain about the persona that newspapers and the mainstream press had projected about him:

> After years of interviews, it became clear that no journalist was willing to tell my tale. Anything I said, anything I did, was given an angle to fit in with the bad-boy image […] I was [an] enigma […] They projected someone who was not the real me: it was the me that the press wanted to project.
>
> (Barton 2012, quoted in Boyle and Haynes, 2013: 212)

In this piece for *The Times* of London, Barton explained that such misrepresentation had prompted him to take to Twitter in order to get his own views across without media (mis)-projection. "No longer," he wrote, "would I let journalistic interpretation to [sic] run wild without any accountability" (ibid.). Barton suggests here that sports journalists can be complacent to the point of behaving unethically, and it is to issues of ethics that we turn in the next chapter.

Questions for discussion

"It is a pointless exercise to try and draw up a list of criteria that seeks to capture the different factors that make certain facts about sport newsworthy. The newsworthiness of something is grasped more by instinct than criteria." Do you agree with this perspective on news values? Give examples from your own practice as a sports journalist in justifying your answer.

"Once it used to be the case that sports journalists would determine what sports fans read. Now, in the digital era, it is the case that sports fans determine what stories sports journalists write." Does this perspective on story selection have merit? Can you provide examples from your work as a sports journalist that support both sides of the argument?

Has the infinite space of the Internet paradoxically led to less variety of sports news content from mainstream media organisations?

TASK: Select a tabloid newspaper and a quality newspaper from the same day and compare the stories that they have run in their sports sections. What news values do you detect being at play in the story selections?

Now analyse the stories that appear on the two newspapers' websites. What news values do you believe are behind the story selections here, and do the values differ to those that were used for the printed editions? If there is a difference, what might be the reasons for this?

Listen/watch two different radio/TV stations' sports news bulletins. Again, what news values do the stories exemplify?

Across all the platforms, to what extent is there a uniformity of content – that is, to what extent have the different outlets covered the same stories? What does this uniformity or lack of uniformity tell us about the state of the sports media?