

# **SPORTS JOURNALISM: SELF-CENSORSHIP, ETHICS AND LIVED EXPERIENCE IN THE DIGITAL ERA**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the major ethical issues experienced by UK sports journalists in the course of their practice in the modern digital media landscape, with a particular focus on self-censorship. In tandem, it captures the lived professional experience of sports journalists in the digital era. My own professional experience is considered alongside the experiences of interviewees and diary-keepers. Initially, an exploratory case study of the work of investigative journalist David Walsh is used to highlight key ethical issues affecting sports journalism. A Kantian deontological theoretical perspective is articulated and developed. Qualitative approaches, specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and autoethnography, are then used to provide an original analysis of the research objectives, enhanced by philosophical analysis. Ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews are conducted with a homogeneous sample of UK sports journalists, while diaries kept by three different journalists provide another seam of data. Reflective logs of my own work as a sports journalist provide the basis for autoethnographic data. The main log runs for two-and-half years (2016-19) with a separate additional log covering the 2019 Rugby World Cup in Japan. The semi-structured interviews, diaries, autoethnography and case study are synthesized. The thesis explores how social media has introduced a host of ethical issues for sports journalists, not least the handling of abuse directed at them. Social media emerges as a double-edged sword. One of its most positive functions is to raise the standard of some journalists' output due to the greater scrutiny that reporters feel they are under in the digital era, but at its worst it can be a platform for grotesque distortion and for corrupting sports journalists' decision-making processes. Self-censorship of both facts and opinions emerges as a pervasive factor in sports journalism, a phenomenon that has been intensified by the advent of social media. Sports journalists show low engagement with codes of conduct, with the research suggesting that participants are on occasion more readily influenced by self-policing dynamics. This project captures vividly sports journalists' personal involvement and emotional investment in their work, and reconsiders the 'toy department'-versus-watchdog classification of sports journalists. The thesis concludes with recommendations for industry, including the introduction of formal support for sports journalists affected by online abuse.

**Keywords:** sports journalism, media ethics, self-censorship, codes of conduct, Kant, deontology, David Walsh



## AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas.

Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University.

Signed:

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## Chapter One: Introduction

### *1.1. Overview*

Sports journalism and philosophy may appear unlikely bedfellows. While philosophy is the posing of deep, fundamental questions, sports journalism is often portrayed as a superficial activity. As one sports writer wryly put it: “They (other journalists) assume that we spend all day, every day, flicking towels at each other’s butts and talking about Pamela Anderson” (Humphries, 2003: 44-45). While they may appear to be antithetical, this project is – in essence – an attempt to perform a type of synthesis between sports journalism and philosophy, a synthesis made urgent by the ongoing ramifications of the digital revolution. Digital technology continues to drive a rapid pace of change in how sports journalism is both done and consumed (Boyle, 2017), and this has given rise to ethical questions that, I believe, require a philosophical lens. Midway through this project, just when I was beset by doubts about a noble but perhaps misguided attempt to tame sports journalism with the cool winds of ethical abstraction, words by the former editor of *The Guardian*, Alan Rusbridger, struck a note of encouragement. Reflecting in his professional autobiography on the editorial conundrums posed by WikiLeaks’ mass release of classified information in 2010, Rusbridger writes:

Once, to do journalism, all you needed was a knowledge of shorthand and to read a couple of books on law and local government. Now the best journalists had to be moral philosophers and students of ethics. The speed of change was both dizzying and relentless. We could sense that we were caught up in a new world of possibilities and disruption. We were, to some extent, helping to drive it. But the accelerating and violent forces buffeting journalism meant there was never enough time to pause and reflect (2018: 253).

Rusbridger was writing about editorial decisions that had implications for national security – of life and death, potentially – and sports journalism, at least in the usual course of events, does not have that kind of bearing. As one of my interviewees for this project was to put it to me, “We’re not in a war zone, we’re not in the House of Commons, we’re not, you know,

necessarily at the front line of that sort of thing” (Interviews: Beta). Nevertheless, the advent of digital technology, and social media in particular, has given rise to ethical issues in sports journalism which require analysis. This thesis is an attempt by one sports journalist to, in Rusbridger’s words, find “enough time to pause and reflect” from the perspective of moral philosophy.

Much of the stimulus for that reflection came as a consequence of being invited by the Institute of Communication Ethics to co-organise a conference on sports journalism ethics in 2017. Speakers attended from across the globe, with academics and sports journalists gathering in the same room to share their insights, research and experiences, much of it captured in this project’s Literature Review in Chapter 3. By this point, my project to synthesise sports journalism and philosophy was already underway, but the conference provided a timely and instructive reminder of the work to be done and the areas that were under-developed. To use an analogy from cycling – a sport which features prominently in this thesis due to the ethics not only of its participants but of those reporting on it – I had gathered a sense of the magnitude of the task in hand through my involvement in an early Grand Tour time trial, but knew more challenging, arduous climbs lay ahead.

A second stimulus for the reflection was my academic history as a philosopher. As an undergraduate I studied philosophy, particularly German philosophy, and gained a Masters in 2004, and this philosophical training has provided an intellectual backdrop to my journalistic practice ever since. When I entered academia as a lecturer in 2013 and began teaching media ethics alongside my journalism this philosophical backdrop moved more into the foreground, and set in train an intellectual journey that culminated in this thesis.

It is also relevant to note in these introductory remarks that the period of me working on this research project coincided with me writing a book on the state of contemporary sports journalism, a book that provided sociological, ethical and historical perspectives on the industry, as well as a practical perspective. *Sports Journalism: The State of Play* (2020) inevitably informed my thinking and approach to this project, just as my work on this project influenced some of the thrusts contained within the book. For example, my work on the book endowed my approach to this thesis with an important historical dimension. Recent literature

on British sports journalism suggests that a digital culture has precipitated a departure from objective reporting to more subjective content (McEnnis, 2013 and 2015; Roberts and Emmons, 2016). However, by working on the book I acquired the sense that the history of objectivity in sports journalism is a complicated area. In the British media, the development of sports journalism in Victorian Britain was not grounded in a culture of objectivity. One sports historian has described how dispassionate observation was unusual in the 19<sup>th</sup> century due to reports often being written by people involved in the sports themselves, often as players or administrators (Huggins, 2004: 151). For all the technological changes which have facilitated the expression of subjective views on social media, there is perhaps a sense in which the culture of subjective sports reporting is the norm, and objectivity – or at least the pretence to it – an aberration. In a study that concerns itself with abstract concepts like truth and duty, this historical dimension has proved an important one to bear in mind.

The over-arching aim of this project is to examine the major ethical issues experienced by British sports journalists in the course of their practice in the modern digital media landscape, with a particular focus on self-censorship, and to capture the lived professional experience of sports journalists in the digital era. In this latter regard, the project has a *phenomenological* aspect. It is an attempt to capture what it *is* – what it feels like – to be a practitioner in an industry that is going through far-reaching and ongoing change (Hutchins and Boyle, 2017), with many of those changes posing ethical challenges and intensifying sports journalists' sense of moral agency (Cairns, 2018). My own professional experience is used here, as are the experiences of interviewees and diary-keepers. The project explores how closely related the lived professional experience of sports journalists is with those journalists' ethical decision-making processes, and builds on themes in the literature which suggest that codes of conduct provide a form of professional self-definition and protection (Cohen-Almagor, 2001; Sambrook, 2012). Following on from Hardin, Zhong and Whiteside's study in the United States which highlighted that "the more a [sports] reporter sees his or her journalistic role within Fourth Estate, 'watchdog' terms, the more the reporter will seek to adhere to the norms that have been adopted by the profession" (2009: 335), this project considers how issues of sports journalism ethics, codes and professional identity are not separate but can overlap.

While questions of ethics and codes of conduct within UK news journalism were examined in detail as part of the Leveson Inquiry (2012), issues of ethics within UK sports journalism have not been considered in such detail. As such, it is timely for issues of ethics among UK sports journalists to be subjected to detailed inquiry, particularly those arising in connection with concerns around a 'post-truth' climate in media communications.

The research objectives are:

RO1) To understand the extent to which sports journalists self-censor and how this could compromise their journalistic activity.

RO2) To identify and examine common ethical challenges experienced by British sports journalists in the course of their professional work in the modern digital media landscape.

RO3) To explore the relevance and impact of codes of conduct on sports journalists' practice.

RO4) To capture the lived professional experience of modern sports journalists in the UK in the digital era and the implications of this for sports journalists' professional identity.

Initially, an exploratory case study of the work of the investigative journalist David Walsh is used as a means of highlighting key ethical issues affecting the sports journalism industry. A Kantian theoretical perspective is articulated and developed. Qualitative approaches, specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and autoethnography, are then used to provide an original analysis of the research objectives, enhanced by philosophical analysis. Ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews are conducted with a homogeneous sample of UK sports journalists, while diaries kept by three different journalists offer another rich seam of data. Reflective logs of my own ongoing experience and insights as a sports journalist provide the basis for autoethnographic data. The main log runs for two-and-half years (2016-19) with a separate additional log covering my time reporting as a freelance journalist at the 2019 Rugby World Cup in Japan. I am a sports writer and broadcaster working for a variety of national newspapers, websites and the BBC. The semi-structured interviews, diaries and autoethnography are synthesized to extract key themes.

## *1.2 Basis for the Research Project*

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

## *1.3 Establishing a Philosophical Perspective – An Exploratory Case Study*

The main body of this thesis begins with a case study. The purpose of this is two-fold. Firstly, to begin setting out the philosophical approach that underpins the project, and, secondly, to use the career of one of the most prominent sports journalists of recent times to bring into focus the project's main ethical concerns, particularly self-censorship (RO1). The philosophical approach is derived from the writings on ethics of the philosopher Immanuel Kant, while the *Sunday Times'* award-winning journalist David Walsh is the case study's subject. Walsh's writings have an ethical tenor; a register which is, as shall be seen, at times distinctly Kantian. Walsh's work therefore serves as a gateway to a wider moral examination of sports journalism. By focusing on an eminent, high-profile sports journalist, the case study also serves to highlight this project's real-world relevance to an audience wider than the academy.

This case study of Walsh is intended to function as what Yin refers to as an "exploratory phase



of an investigation” (2009: 6), enabling key ethical issues to emerge that can then be used to inform subsequent chapters of the thesis and to address RO2 (“To identify and examine common ethical challenges experienced by British sports journalists in the course of their professional work in the modern digital media landscape”). The study uses a Kantian theoretical perspective in order to identify and explore ethical concepts, tensions and incongruities arising in Walsh’s published work. It is argued that Walsh’s journalism and reflections on his practice contain a register that is strongly deontological, or duty-based, which contrasts with the more professionally pragmatic approach to journalistic practice that Walsh attributes to a number of colleagues. Kant’s concepts of the hypothetical imperative and the categorical imperative, along with those of the autonomous moral agent and the heteronomous moral agent (1788/1997, 1785/2005), are 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. The chapter also discusses potential inconsistencies in Walsh’s ethical decisions during the course of his career up to and including 2017, and identifies instances where Walsh’s judgement over sports reporting strategies have arguably deviated from the deontological into the more professionally pragmatic.

The Walsh case study highlights how issues of self-censorship are central to the ethics of sports journalism, and how the integrity of the profession can arguably be measured by the extent to which its practitioners self-censor, whether that be through the self-censoring of *information* or *opinion* that is contained in published material or the self-censoring of *questions*. The case study also illustrates how issues of self-censorship are connected to issues of journalistic distance between reporters and their subjects, as well as to epistemological issues of accessing and delivering the truth. The chapter therefore prepares the ground for a deeper consideration of RO1 (“To understand the extent to which sports journalists self-censor and how this could compromise their journalistic activity”). Walsh’s own sense of personal, emotional involvement in his sports journalism is also captured, anticipating RO4 (“To capture the lived professional experience of modern sports journalists in the UK in the digital era and the implications of this for sports journalists’ professional identity”). However, not covered in depth by the case study is how these issues of sports media ethics – of self-censorship, duty, accessing the truth, personal engagement – translate into a digital, social media-driven media landscape. This transposition into the digital age is explored in

subsequent chapters, with the Literature Review immediately building on the case study by focusing on how the ethical issues raised by Walsh's work can be considered in the era of social media and other digital platforms.

Explicating a Kantian perspective early on in the thesis is also important because 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 has been noted by Keeble (2009: 15). The Kantian approach is therefore a useful one with which to engage with RO3 ("To explore the relevance and impact of codes of conduct on sports journalists' practice").

#### *1.4 The Research Project's Methodology*

The project's Methodology section (Chapter 4) seeks to justify the use of specific qualitative methods to answer the project's research objectives, as well as articulating in further detail the thesis's Kantian critical realist and deontological underpinnings. A methodological synthesis of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and autoethnography (AE) is propounded and defended. The purpose of this methodological approach is to assemble a combination of research methods that enables the project to deliver fresh insights into the ethical issues facing sports journalists in the UK, and to also deliver a vivid sense of the lived experience of those sports journalists. Potential tensions between IPA and AE are considered, as are their shared roots and similarities, and their application to the four specific research objectives is explored. Building on the methodology used in the thesis's exploratory case study, the sense in which the project is a piece of applied philosophy is articulated. The ethical and legal challenges potentially facing the project are considered and processes put in place for their mitigation. Potential limitations and challenges to the data-collection process and the project's overall integrity are also investigated. I also reflect on my own role as a researcher, a role that is acknowledged to be complicated by my ongoing work as a sports journalist. The methodology is honest about the tensions within in, but also seeks to display some methodological innovation.

### *1.5 Findings and Recommendations*

The research project's phenomenological emphasis means it is idiographic – having a strong focus on the particular – so generalisations can only be made with caveat and tentativeness. However, despite its small sample size, the project's main findings can be distilled as follows:

- 1 Self-censorship is a widespread and at times insidious aspect to contemporary sports journalism practice, inhibiting the emergence of truth and honest opinion
  - 1.1 The reasons for self-censoring are varied, with 11 motivations for self-censorship emerging in the IPA Interviews alone
  - 1.2 Self-censorship occurs in many ways, including through the self-suppression of facts, through euphemistic expression, through certain questions going unasked, through the dilution or non-expression of honestly held views
  - 1.3 Social media has led to new – and arguably more complex – forms of self-censorship
- 2 There is marked and profound ambivalence among participants about the impact of social media on sports journalism and sports journalists
  - 2.1 Online abuse is widespread, and for some participants online abuse – whether at them or to the subjects of their stories – is a quotidian experience
  - 2.2 Perhaps paradoxically, social media is viewed as facilitating the spread of inaccuracies, but is perceived by some as a potent driver of improved standards of accuracy, due to journalists feeling that their work is under greater scrutiny than ever before
  - 2.3 Social media is viewed by some sports journalists as a corrupting influence on the integrity of sports journalism, with large Twitter followings corrupting sports journalists by prompting them to make editorial judgements based on their followers' anticipated reaction
- 3 Sports journalists' sense of their duties is multifarious and often individually and collectively incoherent, with some participants holding contradictory – or at least conflicting – notions of what their duties are. Some duties can, perhaps paradoxically, inhibit truth-telling

- 4 If a code of conduct is a “collective conscience of a profession” (Keeble, 2009: 15), then UK sports journalists lack that collective conscience due to an inadequate awareness, interest and engagement with codes
  - 4.1 Sports editors express far greater enthusiasm and knowledge of codes than other sports journalists
  - 4.2 There is a tendency among sports journalists to abdicate their individual responsibility by devolving their compliance with codes onto more senior colleagues
  - 4.3 Sports journalists’ behaviour is informed or regulated as much by unwritten rules and ‘pack’ instinct as it is by formal codes or laws, if not more so. There is a strong element of self-policing by the pack
- 5 There is a general insistence by participants that they have not broken the law or committed serious code breaches, nor are they aware of colleagues having done so
  - 5.1 There are admissions of pockets of fabrication, as when one interviewee admits to publishing transfer stories which he knew were not true, and ghost-writing columns which were entirely made up
  - 5.2 Despite most participants’ firm insistence on not having broken the law or codes, some of their descriptions of particular incidents and working practices suggest that on occasion they have not accurately or truthfully represented stories, as when they have broadcast on-the-record comments despite knowing through off-the-record conversation that the interviewee did not hold those views
  - 5.3 Instances of poor behaviour by sports journalists to other sports journalists occur, ranging from uncivil behaviour at press opportunities and on group chats to physical violence in the press box
6. Three of the participants worked for *The News of the World* in the period leading up to the phone-hacking scandal that led to the newspaper being shut. A by-product of the investigation into the stated research objectives is data on the phone-hacking scandal
  - 6.1 None of the participants involved with *NotW* said they had hacked phones or knew about the practice, although one stated that he would probably have

hacked phones had he been aware of how to do so. This would have been done out of the pressure to land scoops

- 7 Contemporary sports journalism is an emotionally demanding activity, with participants manifesting a gamut of emotions, both positive and negative, in the course of conveying their experience of working in the industry
  - 7.1 There is evidence of burnout and ennui among a minority of participants
  - 7.2 Positive emotions towards the industry and a sense of fulfilment appear to be connected with having a clear sense of professional identity and with discharging associated professional duties
- 8 The binary distinction between a) cheerleading/fans-with-typewriters sports journalism and b) serious, watchdog sports journalism is inadequate. A number of participants emphasise the need to embrace an element of fandom in their coverage. This is distinct from crude characterisations of ‘cheerleading’, and represents in some instances a form of adaptation to a new media ecosystem that has digital interactivity at its centre

As described in previous sections of this Introduction, this project has a Kantian, duty-focused philosophical lens. While the thesis finds clear evidence of disordered thinking about duties in the IPA Interviews, what is notable about the IPA Diaries is the earnestness and depth with which the participants approach their reflections on duties and ethics more generally. This is not the realm of Rowe’s “toy department” (2005, 2007). While the commitment to duties is expressed in more practical (and at times confused) terms, rather than in absolute Kantian-Walshian terms, a sense of duties is a thread that runs through the data.

Relatedly, while codes seem to be of peripheral influence to sports journalists, the research suggests that participants are more readily influenced by self-policing dynamics, and on occasion unwitting collective decision-making. One participant’s description of “unwritten rules” decreeing the adherence to embargoes – and the ostracism that results from breaches – is one example of the self-policing dynamic (Interviews: Alpha). Self-regulation without recourse to codes could be one way of encapsulating this phenomenon. What Keeble calls the “collective conscience of a profession” (2009: 15) is perhaps for sports journalists contained more in self-policed unwritten rules than in a formalised, written code. Echoing

Luckhurst and Phippen's distinction between rules- and values-based systems of journalistic regulation (2014), the sense from participants is of a sports journalism based on generally shared and implicitly acknowledged values rather than explicitly codified rules.

There is no suggestion among participants of an appetite for a bespoke code for sports journalists, as proposed by Ramon-Vegas and Rojas-Torrijos (2018), but the participants' lack of engagement with the Editors' Code of Practice (IPSO, 2019) and the IMPRESS Standards Code (IMPRESS, 2017) as they stand leaves open the possibility that a more tailor-made code could lift ethical engagement. The three basic options for UK regulatory bodies the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) and IMPRESS would therefore seem to be to either: 1) seek to promote the existing codes more effectively to sports journalists; or 2) admit that codes are of limited application to sports journalists and effectively give a shrug at the lack of engagement; or 3) seek to develop a code that speaks more directly to sports journalists – to their concerns and everyday issues. This thesis ends with a recommendation for industry to give consideration to introducing a fusion between options 1 and 3: retaining the current codes but for regulators to add an auxiliary section that highlights some of the key issues affecting sports journalism practice, thereby potentially fostering greater engagement with the main body of the codes themselves.

Social media has introduced a host of ethical issues for sports journalists, not least the handling of abuse directed at them. Having a "thick skin" is the common prescription for dealing with such abuse and knockbacks (Interviews: Alpha, Beta, Zeta, Eta), but this seems an inadequate response given the prevalence and toxicity of some abuse, and given the need to protect journalists' mental health. As such, it is recommended that UK media outlets, sports journalism organisations (such as the Sports Journalists' Association and the Football Writers' Association), and regulators should not only draft guidance on how to responsibly handle such abuse, but also organise forums where instances of abuse can be shared and victims receive support.

More generally, social media emerges in this thesis as a double-edged sword: in the same breath it can be regarded as an important newsgathering tool but also a platform on which verification is difficult. One of its most positive functions is to raise the standard of some

journalists' output, but at its worst it can be a platform for grotesque distortion and for corrupting sports journalists' decision-making processes.

Self-censorship is prevalent in the data. It emerges in various guises through both strands of IPA (interviews and diaries), with a taxonomy of reasons for it provided towards the end of the IPA Interviews section. Forms of self-censorship are explored in detail in both the IPA Diaries and AE sections too, for example self-censorship through euphemism. Self-censorship emerges as a pervasive factor in sports journalism, and a phenomenon that has been intensified by the advent and evolution of social media.

This project captures vividly the personal involvement and emotional investment in their work by sports journalists, with some participants' professional work being a personal achievement that bestows a sense of challenge, meaning and richness on their lives. Other emotions are less positive. Ennui, exhaustion and burnout are evinced by some participants.

Developing Boyle (2017), the project finds that sports journalism is a multifarious professional activity. What is a commonplace form of sports journalism to one outlet is an *infra dig* activity to another journalist, who would resign if asked to do it. While there is a spectrum of views on sports journalists' perception of their own and others' ability and appetite to perform watchdog journalism, the trope of sports journalists as 'fans with typewriters', 'cheerleaders' and belonging to the 'toy department' appears hackneyed and fails to capture the subtlety with which the participants navigate their practice. A number of participants emphasise the need to embrace an element of fandom in their coverage, but this is not a crude form of 'cheerleading' but instead represents, in some instances, a form of adaptation to a new media ecosystem that has digital interactivity with fans as a key element. This journalism is one where sports journalists perceive themselves as needing to be *of* the fans while not necessarily *a* fan. The platforms, voices and activities that constitute sports journalism are diverse and in an ongoing state of flux as the ramifications of the digital revolution still unfold, and the Wittgensteinian concept of 'family resemblance' is invoked to help capture the diversity – and yet loose unity – of the different pursuits and registers that constitute contemporary sports journalism.

## *1.6 Final Introductory Remarks*

If, as Rusbridger's remarks at the start of this chapter suggest, the best contemporary journalism is journalism that is infused with the spirit of moral philosophy, then it is hoped that this project will have a positive practical outcome as well as an academic one. Throughout this project, I have never lost sight of the fact that I myself am a practising sports journalist, and that I am continually seeking to sharpen my writing, my broadcasting, my editing and my overall approach to my work in the industry. Thinking about the ethical challenges that confront sports journalism and what it means to be a sports journalist today are not idle academic pursuits, but pursuits intended to inform and hopefully elevate professional practice.

As a means of bringing into sharper focus some of the specific ethical issues confronting sports journalism, this project now turns its focus on to a sports journalist whose practice has, at times, been propelled by a sense of moral urgency: David Walsh, the reporter who helped expose the cheating of cyclist Lance Armstrong.



## Chapter 2 – An Exploratory Case Study in Sports Journalism Ethics: David Walsh

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

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

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

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

*“Like a brawl in the street, their [Armstrong and Walsh’s] battle for supremacy was an ugly but fascinating sight.”* (Whittle, 2009: 121)

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter analyses the work and career of the award-winning sports journalist David Walsh in order to identify and illuminate central ethical issues facing the contemporary sports journalist. Walsh is an Irish journalist based in the UK who is best known for his investigative reporting for the *Sunday Times* about the American cyclist Lance Armstrong, whom he suspected of taking performance-enhancing drugs (Fearon, 2012). His 13-year investigation culminated in Armstrong being stripped of all seven of his Tour de France titles for doping, and Walsh receiving a number of national awards for the quality of his journalism (Greenslade, 2014). This case study of Walsh is intended to function as what Yin refers to as an “exploratory phase of an investigation” (2009: 6), enabling key ethical issues to emerge that can then be used to inform subsequent chapters of this thesis. The study uses a Kantian theoretical perspective in order to identify and explore ethical concepts, tensions and incongruities arising in Walsh’s published work. It is argued that Walsh’s journalism and reflections on his practice contain a register that is strongly deontological, or duty-based,

which contrasts with the more professionally pragmatic approach to journalistic practice that Walsh attributes to a number of colleagues. Kant's concepts of the hypothetical imperative and the categorical imperative, along with those of the autonomous moral agent and the heteronomous moral agent, are adapted and deployed as part of an analysis that seeks to make explicit a distinction in sports journalists' contrasting approaches to ethical issues around newsgathering. The chapter also discusses potential inconsistencies in Walsh's ethical decisions during the course of his career, and identifies instances where Walsh's judgements over sports reporting strategies have arguably deviated from the deontological into the more professionally pragmatic. Boyle's contention that "too many journalists... abdicate their responsibility to report honestly because they may upset important people or damage their own career trajectory" (2006b) will be used to inform the discussion, as will the concomitant question of the extent to which Walsh and other sports journalists self-censor, developing work done by Binns (2017a), whose primarily quantitative study found significant levels of self-censorship in UK newsrooms. Writings by other cycling journalists who have reflected on the ambiguities of their industry will also be incorporated into the case study analysis (Kimmage, 2007; Whittle, 2009)

The corpus of work that is analysed is Walsh's newspaper and online articles for the *Sunday Times*, and, centrally, the semi-autobiographical books that reflect on his work as a cycling journalist, principally *Seven Deadly Sins: My Pursuit of Lance Armstrong* (2012) and *Inside Team Sky* (2013). During the course of analysing that data from the perspective of moral philosophy, this case study also highlights issues of professional identity that arise in Walsh's career and writing.

## 2.2 Why David Walsh?

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

Armstrong (in Walsh, 2012: 260) and the citation for the award read by Pinsent (*Sunday Times*, Sport p4, May 5, 2013) underscore.

Before deciding on David Walsh as the subject for this case study, the researcher supplemented his pre-existing awareness and knowledge (and, it should be acknowledged, admiration) of Walsh's work with a wider reading of Walsh's output and secondary sources. It was during this review of Walsh's corpus of work that his suitability as the subject for a critical, single-case case study was established. While lionised in some quarters as an exemplar of the intrepid investigative sports journalist who is unafraid to speak truth to power and to hold powerful governing bodies to account (Greenslade, 2014), an initial reading of Walsh's autobiographical works as well as the wider secondary literature about his sports journalism revealed a more nuanced and complex picture. A recurring, negative description of sports journalism in the academic literature is that of it being the "toy department" of the newsroom, with sports journalists too often fulfilling a "cheerleading" function for the sports they cover (English, 2017; Rowe, 2005 and 2007) rather than providing rigorous, detached investigations, and Walsh – at various stages of his career – has had claims of cheerleading made against him (McKay, 2010; BBC, 2017). Turning the spotlight on himself, he too has admitted that at certain times in his career he has fulfilled that role, even suppressing certain stories (Walsh, 2012), through a process that could be characterised as self-censorship; although at other times, Walsh has vigorously denied suggestions that his journalistic detachment and rigour have been undermined in the "cheerleading" manner that others have claimed. This case study will highlight how these periods of "cheerleading" – acknowledged or alleged – occurred either side of Walsh's coverage of the Armstrong case, with the ethical trajectory of his career therefore a more complicated one than him simply being the person who was "the key player in the investigation into doping within cycling that exposed Lance Armstrong" as his profile page on the *Sunday Times'* website puts it (*Times*, n.d.). It was this element of apparent incongruity and inconsistency within Walsh's career that reinforced the initial hunch that he would be an illuminating subject for an exploratory case study.

Similarly, Fearon (2012) rejects the notion of Walsh having had a stable, unchanging basis from which his decisions as a journalist have been made, instead describing Walsh's *Seven*

*Deadly Sins* as an account of a journalist maturing and growing bolder. In a review of the book in Walsh's own newspaper, the *Sunday Times*, Fearon describes Walsh's tenacity in his pursuit of Armstrong as "indefatigable" and summarises the book as being a professional coming-of-age experience for Walsh, it being "a memoir of Walsh's own passage from innocent 'fan with a typewriter' to journalist beseeching his fellow writers to 'get off our knees and approach stars with a level gaze and honest questions'" (Fearon, *ibid.*).

A number of cycling writers have suggested that Walsh's approach to his subject has not always been uniform. Although best-known for his dogged pursuit of Armstrong, cycling journalist Jeremy Whittle has juxtaposed Walsh's early writings about the American cyclist – one of which was a positive vignette in *Inside the Tour de France* (1993) – with the "unflattering" books about Armstrong that he co-authored with former *L'Equipe* journalist Pierre Ballester: *LA Confidentiel* (2004) and *LA Officiel* (2006). The two co-authored books were published when Walsh's drive to expose Armstrong was in full cry. Whittle, despite writing before Armstrong admitted cheating, captured the different tenor of Walsh's early and subsequent writings with a neat turn of phrase, suggesting that "*Inside the Tour de France* is to the two *LA* books what *The Sound of Music* is to *The Exorcist*" (Whittle, 2009: 120). Whittle then deployed another arresting analogy when considering Walsh and Armstrong's long-standing rivalry once Walsh made it his journalistic mission to expose the American's doping: "Like a brawl in the street, their battle for supremacy was an ugly but fascinating sight" (Whittle, 2009: 121).

Cycling writer Feargal McKay, writing in 2010 and so before the truth of Armstrong's drug-taking emerged, sought to capture what he regarded as the separate phases of Walsh's career rather more bluntly than Fearon, writing of the "two versions" of David Walsh. The second is the "big bad Irish wolfhound doggedly pursuing Lance Armstrong", while the first, earlier version was a reporter who alone "trumpeted the cause of cycling in Ireland at a time when it was neither popular nor profitable to do so" (McKay, 2010). Prior to the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, when Walsh provoked controversy in his native Ireland by questioning whether the performances of medal-winning Irish swimmer Michele Smith were clean, McKay claims that Walsh was happy to fulfil the role of cheerleader. But Walsh's articles about Smith, and his subsequent investigation into Armstrong, led to another version of Walsh emerging, a version

which became fully-formed once the Armstrong investigation became Walsh's principal concern in his work for the *Sunday Times*. McKay writes:

When the Armstrong era arrived it was a case of cometh the hour, cometh the man, with Walsh, in the eyes of some, becoming a twenty-first century Torquemada. At a time when soft-ball questions were the order of the day and no one expected press conferences to turn into the Spanish Inquisition, Walsh was there asking awkward questions (McKay, *ibid.*).

According to McKay, fellow journalists were the focus of Walsh's criticism, too, with Walsh "condemning not just the athletes who doped but also those whose credulous reporting gave legitimacy to super-human performances" (McKay, *ibid.*). Walsh, writes McKay, was focused on attempting to exorcise cheerleading from cycling journalism, despite his own past:

His own pom-poms were by then in the bottom drawer. But boy did he used to know how to really shake them all about. Before his Damascene conversion, Walsh was himself just another cheerleader, no better or worse than most of his peers (McKay, *ibid.*).

This is another aspect of Walsh's career that makes him arguably an ideal subject for a case study into sports journalism ethics. At times during his career, Walsh has been prepared to not only reflect critically on his own practice as a sports journalist and commit those reflections to paper, but has also been prepared to reflect on colleagues' practices and to criticise – and even denounce – such practices publicly when he has believed that journalistic integrity has been undermined. This, allied with the fact that he covered one of the biggest stories of world sport – a story which required him to work alongside many other journalists – makes him an interesting sports journalist upon whom to turn the lens of ethical inquiry. Moreover, Walsh's suitability as a powerful case study is reinforced by his own assertion that he is interested in the ethical dimension of his work because he is concerned by what he refers to as "dusty abstracts like journalism and truth" (Walsh, 2012: 72). In addition, one interviewer described Walsh's career as being an "ethical moral morass" (BBC, 2017), again

adding credence to the notion of Walsh being a compelling case study into sports journalism ethics.

An additional dimension to Walsh's career that makes him a strong subject for an exploratory case study is the extent to which the high-profile nature of his reporting has resulted in him arguably becoming a part of the story itself. Walsh's account of his investigation into Armstrong contained in *Seven Deadly Sins* was made into a Hollywood film – an experience about which he has subsequently been interviewed (Bailey, 2015) – and his public backing of the integrity of British Tour de France winner Chris Froome has itself become a story, with other journalists questioning Walsh about his decision to voice his firm support for the cyclist (BBC, 2017). Both these facts indicate that Walsh himself has acquired some form of celebrity or newsworthy status, and the question arises about whether this compromises his journalism. The facet of his career that emerges here is one of Walsh becoming a *participant* in the story he is covering, rather than remaining a detached, impartial observer, as traditional journalistic ethics often dictates (Kieran, 1998; Marsh, 2012; Sambrook, 2012). An indication of this is provided in the introduction he is given to a lengthy television interview on the BBC. Walsh is described by the host, Stephen Sackur, as a journalist whose “persistence and tenacity made him a player rather than a simple observer in one of the darkest chapters in the modern history of elite sport” (BBC, 2017: 0.14-0.22). A related issue in this context is how detached or attached a sports journalist should be in terms of speaking out on behalf of those whom the journalist – taking all the evidence into consideration – believes have been wronged; or, conversely, how vociferous a journalist should be in accusing those whom they believe have perpetrated wrong-doing. This issue was raised by Bell (1998) in the context of war and political reporting as he formulated his stance of the Journalism of Attachment, and Walsh's reporting and comments on his reporting pose the question of whether he believes in – or indeed exemplifies – a sports journalism variant of Bell's theory, under which a journalist should not report entirely detachedly but should instead attach themselves to the viewpoint of the wronged.

A further reason why David Walsh serves as a strong subject for the case study is the nature of his professional profile, which transcends the realm of sports media. As described above, Walsh's work exposing Armstrong was turned into *The Program*, a Hollywood movie, a fact

which gives Walsh wider recognition in popular culture (Bailey, 2015). It is hoped that focusing a case study on a sports journalist who is known beyond the traditional boundaries of sports media will serve as a stimulus to wider public interest in sports journalism ethics.

Finally, it is important to note that, while best known for his work covering cycling for the *Sunday Times*, Walsh's work as a sports journalist is far wider than the one sport, and he has written for a variety of titles. He is therefore a sports journalist with a broad experience that arguably gives his reflections on his practice greater weight for a case study. During his period at the *Sunday Times*, Walsh has covered all the sports that form the main diet for the paper's sports pages, and has reported on a huge number of doping stories in other sports, ranging from baseball (Walsh, *Sunday Times*, Sport p18, February 15, 2009) to athletics (Walsh, *Sunday Times*, Sport p11, June 19, 2016). Prior to joining the *Sunday Times* in 1996, Walsh worked as a trainee reporter on the *Leitrim Observer* before moving to the now-closed *Irish Press* and then the *Sunday Press*, the *Sunday Tribune* and the *Sunday Independent* (Pugh, 2012).

## **2.3 Methodology**

### *2.3.1 The Case Study as an Exploratory Tool*

This case study is being used as an exploratory tool to provide initial insight into some of the ethical issues, tensions and dilemmas that confront sports journalists. By scrutinising Walsh's career and published works it is intended that some of the key issues around journalistic integrity and identity will be put into relief, with those issues then examined in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

The use of case studies to illuminate lines of inquiry that can then be investigated in greater detail is acknowledged by Yin, who discusses the use of case studies as an appropriate means for the "exploratory phase of an investigation" (Yin, 2009: 6). In seeking to define the necessary and sufficient criteria for something to constitute a case study, Yin writes of a case study relying on "multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion" and of it also being a piece of research that "benefits from the prior

development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis” (Yin, 2009: 18). This case study takes as its unit of analysis David Walsh’s journalism up to 1 September 2017, and the two primary data sets are the articles that Walsh has written while an employee of the *Sunday Times* and the books that he has published while working for that title. It also considers a range of other evidence, including broadcast interviews that Walsh has given and reviews of his books. Conceptual analysis is applied to the primary and secondary material.

There have been attempts to explicate the necessary and sufficient conditions for a valid case study, however, this approach to methodological rigour – sometimes referred to as the “checklist” approach to evaluating the strength of a piece of research (Dixon-Woods, 2016: 389) – is open to criticism on the grounds that such prescriptions can be challenged and contradicted almost as soon as they have been nominally identified. In a discussion of qualitative studies, Dixon-Woods states that “a striking proliferation continues of checklists, quality criteria and standards for qualitative research, often adopting non-reconcilable positions on a number of issues” (ibid.). The response to this, she suggests, is to be wary of hasty methodological criticism that immediately precludes a form of inquiry before such an inquiry has had time to prove its worth. Due to the diversity of qualitative study designs, she contends that it is “impossible to specify universally agreed *a priori* defects... that would indicate that a qualitative study is fatally flawed” (ibid.). This paper adapts Dixon-Woods argument for the case study. While the boundaries for the case study are wide – Walsh’s writings for the *Sunday Times*, for whom he has been a staff writer since 1996, are voluminous and as a result not every nuance is able to be analysed in a case study of this length – it is contended that the methodology can receive part of its justification *a posteriori*. As an exploratory study underpinned by philosophical analysis, it is argued that the study partially gains its weight and justification through the concepts that emerge through the course of the case study; concepts which enable insightful – if tentative and provisional – conclusions to be drawn about the nature of ethics in contemporary sports journalism, and which can be explored in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

However, it is important to acknowledge that this case study does have limitations, and that the case study more generally has limitations as a methodological tool. Case studies have been criticised for having insufficient rigour, insofar as they do not follow precise procedures,



and also for failing to provide inadequate grounds for generalisation (Yin, 2009: 14-15). In this case study, it is true that David Walsh does not constitute a “sample” from which firm generalisations can be made about sports journalists’ ethical challenges, but the contention of this chapter is that his widely-praised work and his reflections on it – when considered through the lens of philosophical analysis – provide a gateway through which it is possible to gain a clearer perspective on the topic in question, namely, sports journalism ethics. As an exploratory tool, the case study is therefore a legitimate method in this instance.

This same response could also be provided to the objection that a case study into sports journalism ethics lacks validity if it is modelled on a single-case design. According to this objection, without multiple cases – and therefore the potential to perform cross-case synthesis – the study can only make propositions that are so weak as to afford no, or next to no, insight into the topic. If an exploratory case study into the ethics of sports journalism is to have any penetration, then it could be contended that the work and career of more than one sports journalist needs to be analysed. The rebuttal that can be made to this is similar to that stated in the previous paragraph, which is that as an initial means of exploring the topic David Walsh provides an insightful starting point given the success, longevity, variety and controversy that have marked his career. It is contended that David Walsh provides a *critical* case study, in that his sports journalism has been so successful – and at times so ethically and professionally contentious – that a detailed exploration of it enables deep insight to be provided into key issues in the field of contemporary sports journalism ethics.

The case study’s question may be stated as follows: what can David Walsh’s career at the *Sunday Times*, when scrutinised through the lens of philosophical analysis, reveal about the ethical issues confronting the contemporary sports journalist? More detail will now be given on the nature of that philosophical lens.

### 2.3.2 A Kantian Theoretical Perspective

This case study’s exploration of Walsh’s output and journalistic approach is analysed through the perspective of Kantian practical reasoning (Kant 1788/1997, 1785/2005). In his writings on ethics and the formulation of his categorical imperative, Kant invokes the distinction

between decisions that are taken as a means of accomplishing something else (instrumental reasoning based on “hypothetical imperatives”), and decisions that are made because the action underpinned by that decision represents an action that is of value in itself. The latter type of reasoning, which manifests itself in the edicts of duty, admits of no exceptions (it is universal and categorical) and the moral agent is obligated to do it (it is imperative). Using Walsh’s writings and career as a springboard, the chapter uses a Kantian idiom to conceptually analyse the ethical and practical decisions that sports journalists make in the course of gathering and publishing their stories. In particular, this chapter focuses on the tension that arises in Walsh’s writings – and in his own deliberations on other journalists’ actions – between what shall be termed the *journalistic hypothetical imperative* to maintain access, contacts and thereby the flow of stories, and the *journalistic categorical imperative* to pursue and report the truth regardless of the professional consequences. Through a consideration of this dichotomy, this chapter will explore the fissure that exists in sports journalism between those whose professional practice is driven by instrumental reasoning and those who adopt a deontological approach. The former are motivated by the aim – or need – to maintain access and contacts for the sake of then being able to fulfil certain journalistic goals (e.g. meeting a deadline, meeting a story quota, satisfying an editor), while the latter place certain duties at the heart of sports journalism and declare, implicitly or explicitly, that those values are inviolable. While this distinction would appear to firmly split journalists into two groups, 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).

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”). When deliberating on what the end of my action ought to be, the categorical imperative states that I as a moral agent am constrained by reason to “act only on that maxim which I can at the same time will as a universal law” (Kant, 1785/2005). So, the Kantian journalist could argue that publishing an article that withheld the truth, or deliberately not pursuing a story despite having some evidence or hunch of wrongdoing, is morally wrong because such decisions, if applied universally (made a “universal law”) would lead to contradiction and the collapse of journalistic communication; they have an illogicality to them that reason resists. This chapter will consider to what extent Walsh exhibits a deontological approach to his sports journalism.

There is another distinction that Kant draws which will be used in this chapter as a tool to analyse Walsh’s output and career. This is the distinction between the “autonomous” moral agent – the person who behaves according to the dictates of their independent reason and will – and the “heteronomous” person, whose will is constrained by external forces, such as their individual desires or the aim of satisfying the wishes of a parent or a perceived god-like figure (Kant, *ibid.*). This distinction is not one that can be drawn entirely separately from the distinction made in the previous paragraph between hypothetical and categorical imperatives, a point that is made by one recent Kantian:

Obedience to a hypothetical imperative is always obedience to the condition expressed in its antecedent. It therefore always involves heteronomy of the will. Obedience to a categorical imperative, however, since it springs from reason alone, must always be autonomous (Scruton, 1997: 75).

The autonomy/heteronomy distinction in this case study is used to try to illuminate the different mind-sets required by sports journalists when covering ethically contentious stories. Journalism is a deadline-driven industry, and in the digital age it is one that is also driven by the need to meet website story quotas and unique visitor targets (Conlon, 2017). The pressure to meet these deadlines and quotas is passed down from an editor, and it could be posited that a reporter who works in these circumstances and feels their pressure – and who adapts

their behaviour accordingly – is a reporter who works heteronomously. Such a reporter is likely to feel the pull of the journalistic hypothetical imperative described above, and pursue those courses of professional action which will be advantageous in meeting the day-to-day pressures of the industry. By contrast, the autonomous sports journalist retains an independence and resilience which enables them to heed the dictates of journalistic ethical duty rather than the more short-term journalistic hypothetical imperatives that enable a reporter to satisfy the quotidian requirements of their routine. The extent to which Walsh has shown autonomous or heteronomous journalistic behaviour will be explored, as will the way that Walsh has characterised his fellow sports journalists in relation to this distinction.

A Kantian perspective has been applied before when considering journalistic ethics, but has 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). Indeed, he evinces a contempt for sport, stating:

Truth-telling in the public interest and for the public good is not an exaggerated, unattainable ideal, but one that, within the limits of practical affairs to which news reporting belongs, journalists can reasonably try to respect and observe. If we do not desire truthful news reporting, then we can occupy our time with fiction, sports, and similar entertainments (Jacquette, 2010: 215).

The decision to use a Kantian theoretical lens to frame this chapter’s ethical analysis was partly informed by the researcher’s own experiences as a sports journalist. As a sports reporter, I have in my own practice been confronted by the dilemma of either adopting a reporting strategy that would keep sources happy but potentially fail to reveal the full picture to audiences, or revealing what I deemed important facts to the audience but in so doing potentially upsetting sources. Reflection on my own professional practice, combined with a surface knowledge of Walsh’s work, therefore gave me some confidence at the outset of the study that the Kantian approach would be a useful one. Upon commencing the case study

and becoming more deeply acquainted with Walsh's work and other data, the effectiveness of deploying the Kantian lens was reinforced. This was due to the deontological terminology and approach that underpinned a substantial amount of Walsh's work. Moreover, another concept emerged: that of a consequentialist approach to sports journalism practice versus a deontological one. The sports journalist who uses the *hypothetical journalistic imperative*, pursues a consequentialist line of thought: if I want to make my professional life run smoothly by meeting deadlines/meeting a story quota/preserving easy access to sources *etc*, then what actions are most likely to have the consequence of bringing that state of affairs about? This consequentialism will also be explored.

This case study is not intended to operate from a theoretical perspective that imposes binary and unshifting categories on sports journalists. Instead, it will highlight some of the incongruities and tensions that have emerged through the different reporting techniques that Walsh has adopted during his career. The apparently professionally pragmatic nature of some of the decisions that Walsh has taken will be explored, and – through a discussion of his career – the practical difficulties, if not impossibilities, of being a consistent Kantian sports journalist will be analysed. While Walsh often uses a vocabulary redolent of deontological professional responsibility, the intrusion or seduction of the pragmatism of the hypothetical journalistic imperative remains.

The use of this theoretical perspective is open to objection. It could be argued that it is too philosophical and removed from the day-to-day realities of journalistic decision-making, in as much as it overlooks the work done by Breed (1960) and Bourdieu (2005) – work that focused on how journalists, in Breed's term, become socialised to their occupation and, in the latter's terminology, operate within a professional "field" and "habitus" that has its own routines and unique conventions. Breed contends that a journalist's professional ethical viewpoint is primarily determined on the job "by osmosis", arguing that a new journalist "discovers and internalises the rights and obligations of his status and its norms and values" (Breed, 1960: 182). However, it is the manner in which Walsh resists this "socialisation" premise that makes him a compelling focus for a case study. Walsh's enshrining of the pursuit of truth at all costs is also a position that puts him at odds with another position of Breed's, who contends that "accurate reporting is sometimes sacrificed to these other virtues of respect, decency, and

order, that is, the mass media have often placed more emphasis on some value other than truth” (Breed, 1964: 183). It is the exceptional boldness of parts of Walsh’s career, coupled with its success, that invites the Kantian analysis.

## 2.4 Discussion

### 2.4.1 David Walsh the Kantian

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

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

However, it is too simple to state that Walsh is a straightforward Kantian and that his entire corpus is underpinned by a deontological morality. The following sections explore the ambiguities that exist within his writings and reflections, in the course of which other key ethical issues within sports journalism, including self-censorship, emerge.

#### *2.4.2 The “Proper Journalist” and Self-Censorship – Going with the Tide Versus Resisting the Tide*

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

Walsh is frank in acknowledging the sense of warm feeling and good will that can exist between a journalist and those whom they are covering; a feeling that can verge on hero-worship or the man-crush. “The man-crush is a hazard of life for the sportswriter”, he writes (Walsh 2012: 2), referring both to his initial meeting with Armstrong and his work a decade earlier covering the Irish cyclist Sean Kelly. Reading Walsh’s account of that time covering Kelly, a number of themes emerge: of confessed self-censorship; of Walsh literally riding too close to the circus; and of the blurring power of the sports man-crush. When, in 1982, Walsh covered his first Tour de France, he describes how he travelled with Kelly’s fiancée and her father – so, to continue Boyle’s circus metaphor (2006b), right at the centre of the circus. And then, two years later during a Paris-to-Brussels race, while writing a biography of Kelly, Walsh – while not using the term – produced what, in light of the Armstrong investigation, now

appears a dissonant piece of self-censorship that resulted in the public being denied knowledge of Kelly's drug-taking. Inherent in Walsh's account, which merits being stated at some length, is a sense of complicity in a story being swept under the carpet, and a retrospective sense of the absence of integrity and professionalism:

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

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

When I wrote about the 1984 Paris-Brussels in the biography, I didn't mention the pills in the morning and I tried to make the case that it was hard to believe Kelly had used a substance so easily detectable. I chose to see the ridiculous leniency of the authorities as proof that, at worst, it was a minor infraction. It wasn't how a proper journalist would have reacted. At the time I knew what I was doing (Walsh, 2012: 17-18).

Earlier in this chapter, Walsh was described as having been "just another (sports journalism) cheerleader" in the early years of his career, before putting the "pom-poms... in the bottom draw" (McKay, 2010). 'Cheerleading' is what he could be accused of having done here; for the sake of preserving the reputation of a certain sport and, in particular, one of its competitors (a competitor to whom he was close), Walsh buried a story. Cheerleading, however, is arguably too gentle a way of phrasing it. Another way of putting it would be to say that Walsh self-censored – that he prevented the truth from being published and disseminated – and that by doing so he fulfilled an instance of the *journalistic hypothetical imperative* mentioned



above: that in order to maintain his access and friendship to professional cyclist Sean Kelly, Walsh sidelined values and put pragmatism in their place. This, writes Walsh, was not the behaviour of “a proper journalist”, implying that an authentic journalist would not conceal facts for pragmatic or emotional reasons but would instead behave with more integrity. Self-censorship therefore emerges as a concept right at the centre of a study into the ethics of sports journalism.

#### 2.4.3 *Fairy Tales and Whitewash*

Walsh’s coverage of doping within sport has not been confined to cycling. His coverage of Irish swimmer Michelle Smith at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics also saw him go against the tide, along with fellow journalists Paul Kimmage and Tom Humphries. Walsh states that no-one else in the Irish media chose to ask questions: “Everywhere else it was a whitewash job: big brush, broad strokes... ‘Michelle, how did you feel when they played the national anthem and you saw the flag go up?’ Hear no hard questions. Speak no hard questions” (2012: 34). Vilification and pariah-status followed, with the media itself, writes Walsh, driving the process of ostracism:

Long before we came home from Atlanta, the three of us were isolated and denounced. The debate over Atlanta took place in two different languages. Paul, Tom and I attempting to lay out the basis for asking questions about how an earnest second-rate swimmer should morph into one of the great Olympians. The other story was glorious: a week-long hallelujah, a fairy tale written by journalists whose enthusiasm overwhelmed every critical faculty (2012: 35).

This connects back to the notion of sports journalists being in perennial danger of being little more than ‘fans with typewriters’, allowing the easy ‘good news story’ to trump investigations and the asking of difficult questions. To phrase it in a Kantian idiom, it is the muffling of the *journalism categorical imperative* in favour of professional pragmatism. It also poses questions around the news values of sports desks, and how sports editors potentially rate the value of (in this case) a national feel-good story over sports journalism that is more critical, questioning and potentially negative.

More recently, Walsh has written about tennis player Maria Sharapova's ban for continuing to take the prescription drug meldonium after it had been added to the World Anti-Doping Agency's list of prohibited substances (Walsh, *Sunday Times*, Sport p13, March 13, 2016). He has also focused on the doping allegations around Mo Farah's coach Alberto Salazar and connected this to the breaking down of the public's belief in sporting fairy tales:

Once upon a time when an Olympic champion spoke, people believed. With the gold medal came status and a presumption that the latest winner possessed more character than the rest of mankind. That has changed. Champions speak now and it's hard not to notice the raising of eyebrows. You could blame Ben Johnson, Lance Armstrong, Marion Jones, Kostas Kenteris, or pretty much every member of the old German Democratic Republic team that didn't win Olympic medals as much as collect them. In one way or another, all these champions fell and found that where they landed was a pretty congested part of the arena. They lost their medals. We lost our innocence (Walsh, *Sunday Times*, Sport p15, June 21, 2015).

This notion of a loss of innocence – and the tension between belief and non-belief – runs through Walsh's work, as does the connected notion of sports journalists constructing "fairy tales" (Walsh, 2012: 35). Yet he himself could be accused of crafting his own fairy tales. In an early book, *Inside the Tour de France*, there is an element of myth-building or fairy tale-construction as Walsh writes vignettes of a number of key figures in the 1993 Tour, including the then American debutant – or "neophyte" – Lance Armstrong. Walsh recounts Armstrong's early abandonment by his father, and his mother's resilience, love and devotion to her son (Walsh, 1994: 14-15). Reflecting on Armstrong's demeanour in the press conference following his first stage win, Walsh writes:

At a distance the honesty could have been mistaken for arrogance but it was not that. With Armstrong there is no false modesty, no playing down of his qualities but neither is there conceit... Yet to see only the straight-talker is to miss the wide-eyed boy in his first Tour. The smiling debutant who turned heads at the compulsory medical examination (Walsh, 1994: 21-22).

However, there is arguably a legitimate distinction between the writing of rags-to-riches or adversity-overcome human interest stories (“fairy tales”) when there are no grounds for suspicion about the fairy tale’s subject, and the refusal to countenance the suggestion that the fairy tale could be bogus once negative evidence begins to emerge. In *Seven Deadly Sins*, the desire not to acknowledge the negatives or pose the difficult questions is for Walsh embodied in the actions of a fellow journalist. John Wilcockson, of *Velo News*, was one of the journalists Walsh shared a car with on the 1999 Tour, the so-called Tour of Renewal after the Festina team had been exposed the previous year by French police and customs as having a doping culture. It was Armstrong’s first tour after recovering from testicular cancer. Although Walsh himself does not make it explicit, the contrast between himself and Wilcockson serves as a useful classificatory dichotomy. Wilcockson is “the eternal enthusiast, rarely engaged in any conversation that questioned Armstrong” (2012: 51). Walsh describes Wilcockson’s reluctance to engage in the debate over whether or not Armstrong was doping as a form of journalistic superficiality: “But mostly, when I said something directly to John, he would turn his head a little to the side so the words could flow in one ear and out the other. Perhaps he was so focused on the race itself that he didn’t want to look underneath it all” (2012: 68).

Inherent in this reluctance – or refusal – to peer under the surface is a sense of retreat, of journalistic disengagement and a consequent superficiality to the coverage. This is at odds with the traditional journalistic imperative of holding the powerful to account, an imperative that Walsh sees as applying equally to sport as it does to news reporting:

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

As has been noted above, the notion of what a “proper” journalist should do is one that infuses *Seven Deadly Sins* and in places Walsh’s contempt for those colleagues whom he believes are complicit in “making fools of readers and fans” is vividly expressed. Faced with a choice between nurturing contacts through the avoidance of posing awkward questions, or jeopardising that access by holding the powerful to account, Walsh’s position is clear, and he provides that clarity by means of a contrast. The contrast is with Wilcockson, whom Walsh describes as being on something akin to a professional life-support machine, with the oxygen for his career being supplied by the quotations provided by access to the leading athletes:

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

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

The tone of disdain for those journalists happy to seek bread and butter with a coating of cream, rather than examining deeper, more complex flavours within the sport, is evident. However, Walsh, when delivering the 2014 Hugh Cudlipp Lecture, said that unpopularity among the press corps had not caused him anxiety due to a good story always being worthy of the chase, “no matter how difficult pursuing it might be” (Greenslade, 2014). At the same event, he described how he had resisted falling into the caricature of a sports journalist – that of being “a fan with a typewriter” (ibid.).

The extent of Walsh's unpopularity among fellow journalists – and the machinations by Armstrong and his team to ostracise Walsh – are captured by Whittle (2009). What emerges from his words are the loneliness and sacrifice that the journalistic duty to truth-telling can necessitate. While other journalists take the line of least resistance for the sake of preserving access to Armstrong and his entourage, Walsh literally takes his own path:

Walsh's campaign against Armstrong made him the black sheep of the press corps. Suddenly, he found that friends were hard to come by. When we spotted the Irishman trudging his way around Liege on his own as the 2004 Tour started, we joked as we sped past that this was because nobody wanted to be seen car-sharing with the troll king by Lance spies.

Incredibly, this turned out to be true.

So paranoid had Armstrong made other journalists that Walsh became a virtual exile... Armstrong wanted us to choose between his way and the highway. Being responsible international sports journalists with high-minded ethics, most of us just sat on the fence.

With Armstrong's popularity at its peak, few who worked in cycling could afford to be blacklisted, and those who maintained their friendship with Walsh were tarred with the same brush (Whittle, 2009: 127-128).

Walsh's disdain for elements within the media is powerfully conveyed in his recollections of covering the 1999 Tour. The press tent, he writes, is "crammed to dangerous levels with sycophants and time servers", while journalists are part of the "confederacy of cheerleaders" who protect Armstrong, along with administrators at the UCI (2012: 88). Walsh repeatedly invokes this lexicon of cheerleading, and in *Seven Deadly Sins* reminds readers of what he wrote on the day that Armstrong won his first Tour de France in 1999, under the headline "Flawed Fairytale". Arguably, it is as much an indictment of the practices of his own trade than it is an allegation against Armstrong and the peloton of 1999, with Walsh calling for more scepticism and more hard questions from those in the *salle de presse*, and fewer paeans to glorious heroism:

As for the readers of the *Sunday Times*, I hoped they would think a little before loving this new hero. 'For too long sportswriting has been unrestrained cheerleading, suspending legitimate doubts and settling for stories of sporting heroism. Of course there are times when it is right to celebrate, but there are other occasions when it is equally correct to keep your hands by your sides' (Walsh 2012: 82).

Walsh's statement to the *Sunday Times*' readers that he would not be applauding Armstrong went against the tide; while others self-censored, he did not. Walsh had a boldness that others lacked: "Walsh was not alone in his suspicions, but was almost alone in voicing them" (Pugh, 2012). This notion of 'giving voice' to one's journalistic beliefs – or why it is that they might be muffled – emerges as a central issue.

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

Keeping one's hands by one's side is reminiscent of the injunction contained within the title of an old collection of American sports journalism: "No cheering in the press box" (Holtzman, 1974). Walsh offers an updated plea for journalistic distance and professionalism. In some respects it is old-fashioned, in others it is hugely disruptive to the modern sports journalism circus.

#### 2.4.4 Omerta, Professional Ostracism and Self-Censorship

Walsh refers in *Seven Deadly Sins* to the prevailing code of silence – or *omerta* – within the sport that served to keep the extent of doping unacknowledged outside the circus of cycling

(2012: 73). Primarily, this code of silence is depicted as applying to the community of professional cyclists itself – the peloton – but the code also extended its reach into the broader administration of the sport, both into cycling teams and the governing body itself, the UCI. A breach of the code, says Walsh, was punishable by the whistleblower being hounded out of the community. An example he cites from 1999 is that of the French rider Christophe Bassons, who spoke out about an enduring doping culture in cycling during the so-called Tour of Renewal, and who swiftly found himself marginalised by the peloton, both through quotes given to the media and on-the-road behaviour, including from Armstrong, who told the Frenchman that his public comments meant that he had no place as a professional cyclist. Although Walsh does not put it in such terms, cycling therefore exercised its own form of self-policing:

Professional cycling has always exercised an *omerta* and it has played a significant role in the endurance of a drug culture. But more than a code of silence is at work here and it is not coincidental that the Sicilian word has become associated with the peloton, because when a rider breaks the code, he can expect a mafia-like response (2012: 73).

This notion of self-policing and *omerta* can also be applied to the media equivalent of the peloton – the pack of journalists covering the Tour – with sports journalists also vulnerable to receiving a mafia-like response. This tough response can come from someone within the world of professional cycling, or – potentially more insidious for the journalism industry – can come from inside journalism itself. As such, the code can be applied by an *extrinsic* agency, or be *intrinsic* – internal to the profession. A striking example of the extrinsic application of pressure is provided in the treatment Walsh received from Armstrong’s advisers. Walsh describes how he was first approached by Armstrong’s agent and qualified lawyer, Bill Stapleton, at the start of the 2000 Tour. Walsh’s account of what was said is worth stating in full, as it captures the *omerta*-style pressure that can be brought to bear on sports journalists, and the collusion that can potentially enter into the relationship between sports journalists and their sources as a consequence of such pressure:

‘Look, we’re aware of what you wrote about Lance last year, what you’ve been writing this year.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Well, we could have a better relationship, things could be better between you and Lance.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘What I mean is that if you were more balanced in what you wrote, we could help with access.’

‘I believe I’ve been fair.’

‘We are going to be watching what you write very closely and we will not be afraid to take action if that is necessary.’

‘Bill, is that a threat?’

‘It is a threat.’ (Walsh 2012: 107).

The excerpt is arguably uncharacteristic of the majority of journalist-PR discussions regarding access in that it is explicitly acknowledged that a threat is being made. However, it is indicative of the power struggle that can be played out, and illustrates the understanding from sports representatives that player access – and its withdrawal – can be a tool for undermining a journalist. However, as stated above, the drive to *omerta* can also arguably come from within journalism itself, rather than from without. A compelling example of this is provided by the case of Pierre Ballester, who was a cycling journalist on French sports newspaper *L’Equipe* when Armstrong won the first of his seven Tours in 1999, and who went on to collaborate with Walsh on books about Armstrong. Disillusioned by what he had witnessed on the 1999 Tour, Ballester asked his editor if he could be given a new role that would allow him to exclusively write about, and investigate, doping within cycling (Walsh, 2012: 108-110). Ballester was given the role, but the nature of the questioning and investigations that he subsequently pursued resulted in the other eight cycling journalists on *L’Equipe* feeling like their own access to cyclists was being jeopardised: “At first some of the other journalists were suspicious, then they refused to speak with Pierre, and in time he became a pariah, totally alone within that group of nine” (Walsh, 2012: 111). Ballester was eventually sacked from the paper following a spell of internecine warfare within the department, although he later received financial recompense after taking legal action (Walsh, 2012: 112-115). Ballester’s



treatment by his own colleagues illustrates the damage that can be caused by some sports journalists' desire to keep their sources sweet, and the lengths some will go to to maintain that – even turning on their own colleagues.

Alex Butler, Walsh's sports editor at the *Sunday Times* throughout his reporter's pursuit of Armstrong, provides his own view on some sports journalists' lack of bravery, and indirectly suggests that they effectively colluded in the Armstrong cover-up through self-censorship (although he does not use that word). Butler writes of "the tame, fawning cycling correspondents. The L.A. fan club," adding:

Even the countless journalists who told me how great a job they thought the *Sunday Times* was doing while their own newspapers joined in the L.A. adulation made me cringe. And even worse, the journalists who poured scorn on Walsh's investigations because they were too damned lazy to undertake their own. They know who they are (Walsh, 2012: 410).

Butler's description of the cringe-worthy "adulation" heaped on Armstrong by a compliant media seeking the line of least resistance chimes with Walsh's own earlier description of "unrestrained cheerleading". Using the Kantian idiom of this chapter, it also emphasizes sports journalists' perceived willingness to pursue the *journalistic hypothetical imperative* of professional pragmatism at the expense of the dutiful pursuit of truth regardless of the consequences.

#### *2.4.5 Embedded Sports Journalism – Inside Team Sky*

A key issue in Walsh's career, however, is how compatible "keeping your hands by your sides" is with accepting an offer to be embedded with a cycling team; and a cycling team with a stated agenda to portray itself as clean. Embedded reporting is a process whereby reporters are given access to organisations and/or locations in order to facilitate their reporting, and most frequently occurs in war reporting (Harcup, 2014). Walsh's acceptance of an offer to live and travel with Team Sky [now Team Ineos] in 2013 is an example of embedded sports journalism, and one that engenders a *prime facie* tension with Walsh's previous independent

work covering – and exposing – Armstrong. The tension grows more acute when one considers what Walsh himself wrote in *Seven Deadly Sins*: “Team Sky is sponsored by BSKyB, which is part of News Corp, the ultimate owner of the *Sunday Times*” (2012: 125). For a journalist who showed such tenacity, fearlessness and scepticism in his years uncovering Armstrong’s mendacity, the early pages of *Inside Team Sky* arguably give rise to some concern. While not full-throated cheerleading, there is a positive, cosy tenor to this section on just the third page of the book:

This struck a chord because I’d encountered the same sense of purpose a lot in Team Sky. It is common for people in this sport to fall in love with the milieu and their lives on the road. A lot of the Sky people don’t feel like that, but they do like the environment around their team: the good organisation, the intelligent approach to preparation, the behaviour demanded of both riders and staff (Walsh 2013: 3).

The positive adjectives (good, intelligent), blended with the team being described as different but yet possessed of an explicit sense of purpose, creates an image of an unique organisation that Walsh believes will be successful. The sense of Walsh being in danger of surrendering the journalistic independence that he had shown through his tenacious coverage of Armstrong is quickly reinforced when he introduces the reader to Dave Brailsford, the team principal. Again, the adjectives are liberally applied, and the picture emerges of a team distinguished by unflinching politeness and obligingness:

It is 7.30 on this beautiful Corsican evening when Brailsford returns from somewhere. Since I’ve been around the team he has been consistently friendly, helpful, at times disarmingly honest, and always interesting. The courtesies extended by the staff are in part a reflection of their respect for Brailsford (Walsh 2013: 5).

A peculiar fact involved in Walsh’s acceptance of Brailsford’s invitation to live and work alongside Team Sky is that a similar offer had been made to another cycling journalist, Paul Kimmage, three years earlier, but the relationship between Kimmage and Brailsford had swiftly broken down once Kimmage was embedded. Walsh writes that Kimmage, who was a close friend of his, had given a straightforward account of what went wrong. Kimmage had

been told by Brailsford that he had full access to the team, but as soon as Kimmage began to ask difficult questions around doping the team closed ranks (Walsh 2013: 5). Jarring too are the terms which Walsh uses to describe Team Sky's PR manager, Chris Haynes, in the closing page of the first chapter. Walsh describes a conversation that the pair have about Haynes' step-son, with Haynes then thanking Walsh for his kindness. "Such sensibility hardly goes with the media manager's job," writes Walsh, "but Haynes isn't your common-or-garden PR operator" (2013: 13). The wary, sceptical journalist appears to have been replaced by the avuncular pal. The former makes an appearance seven pages later, however. Sitting in a meeting at which Brailsford is outlining his media relations policy to the rest of the team in order to minimise the leakage of information during the Tour, Walsh wonders if he is being had: "I'm sitting in the third seat on the left, listening and wondering if, unknown to myself, I am being controlled?" (2013: 20). Four years later, and long after the embedding project with Team Sky was over, Walsh concluded that he had, after all, been controlled. Interviewed by Stephen Sackur for the BBC's HARDtalk show, Walsh said he had been "duped" by Brailsford (BBC, 2017).

Walsh was invited to live with Team Sky after Brailsford declared to Walsh that the team had "nothing to hide" (2013: 27) and that Walsh could "travel with members of the team, speak to who you want to, go into the doctor's room, see who's coming in and out of the hotel" (2013: 28). Walsh's response, given the previous experiment with Kimmage, can perhaps be viewed as credulous and starry-eyed: "Leaving Manchester that evening, I knew the offer had to be accepted. How could you be a journalist and not want to travel inside the world number one cycling team?" (2013: 29). To use Boyle's idiom (2006b), Walsh was not only about to run too close to the circus, he was about to become part of it. However, there are countervailing passages too, where Walsh seeks to establish his independent credentials during the assignment, as when he states: "I'm not just entitled to my scepticism, it is my job to have it with me at all times. We've all been fooled, duped and suckered by this race" (2013: 33).

Walsh did not wait for the publication of *Inside Team Sky* to deliver his verdict on Chris Froome following the cyclist's first Tour de France win in 2013. In a 3,300-word piece for the *Sunday Times* published on the final day of the Tour with Froome's victory guaranteed and headlined "Why I believe in Chris Froome", the article's standfirst read: "A terrific Tour de

France has delivered a great new champion in Chris Froome. Jeering crowds have accused him of doping. The same mob once idolised Lance Armstrong. They were wrong about him. And they are wrong about Froome” (Walsh, *Sunday Times*, Sport p6-7, July 21, 2013). In the article, Walsh explains how he has been “inside” the team for nine weeks of the past six months, and why he did it: “The objective was straightforward: to determine as much as I could what was the culture inside the team, to see if they were ethical and free of doping. Because Froome was likely to be the team’s star rider, he was the one I most wanted to know” (ibid.). As such, the question can be posed about whether the principle of being embedded in this manner – existing day-by-day in a privileged position alongside the subjects of his reporting – was actually a manifestation of Walsh’s deontological-like commitment to discovering and reporting the truth (as it enabled him to be close to the person – Froome – whom he most wanted to scrutinise), or whether it was a form of heteronomy that ran an inherent risk of undermining his journalistic autonomy.

Both at the time of accepting Brailsford’s invitation and subsequently, Walsh has been accused of opening himself up to claims of “cheerleading” (BBC, 2017). The claim of cheerleading arguably gained greater power when allegations of improper use by Team Sky of the Therapeutic Use Exemption (TUE) process involving performance-enhancing drugs emerged, with the claims focused on former lead cyclist Bradley Wiggins. BBC interviewer Stephen Sackur challenged Walsh over this in a vivid manner:

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

Sackur’s wording of the question is significant, as it captures the perceived dissonance between Walsh’s work covering Armstrong and Walsh’s decision to accept Team Sky’s invitation to effectively become an embedded reporter with them. Critically, in the same interview, Walsh went on to state that – in light of subsequent facts that had emerged over

Wiggins' use of TUEs – he felt he had been “duped” by Brailsford. What is surprising here is arguably not the allegation itself but the fact that the award-winning, ethically-driven journalist who helped bring Lance Armstrong to account is acknowledging that he had allowed himself to be compromised. It is worth providing at some length the transcription of the interview with Sackur in which Walsh uses the term:

Sackur: Frankly, they were using you as a tool because they wanted to convince you that they were the new clean team.

Walsh: I think it's right to say they used me but in fairness to all the good people in Team Sky because I believe there are about 70 to 80 people working in the team. I believe that if you took four people out of that team, and one of them has already gone, that you would have a very clean team. I was invited to go into that team by Dave Brailsford and there's no question he duped me...

Sackur: [explains Therapeutic Use Exemptions]

Walsh: He (Brailsford) actually duped a lot of people inside his own team. Chris Froome had no idea that Bradley Wiggins was given these TUEs (BBC, 2017: 11.28-13.10).

This exchange and Walsh's decision-making around the *Inside Team Sky* project raise a number of areas for ethical inquiry. One is around whether embedding of this nature is ever ethically justifiable by a sports journalist or whether it inherently runs the risk of being tantamount to – or close to – cheerleading or collusion. The second, more general, area is around the long-standing question about the distance that should ideally exist between sports journalists and the subjects of their reporting. Both in the book and subsequently, Walsh has argued that his time with Team Sky did not involve him breaking his ethical principles, while also conceding – as the “dupe” allegation suggests – that he was to an extent manipulated.

There is, however, evidence that Walsh's time with Team Sky did not prompt him to go 'soft' on the team and its cyclists. The year after he had been embedded with Sky, Walsh published a questioning piece about Froome's use of an asthma reliever during the Tour of Romandie (Walsh, *Sunday Times*, Sport p18, June 22, 2014), saying Team Sky's application for a Therapeutic Use Exemption went against the team's internal policy of not seeking TUEs for riders in competition: "Team Sky talk the talk of high ethical standards but do not walk the walk... Team Sky like to portray themselves as the most ethical team in the peloton. The evidence says otherwise" (ibid.). Earlier that month, he also wrote an opinion piece that focused on the tense relationship between Froome and Bradley Wiggins, in which he asserted, "There was no trust... His (Froome's) relationship with Wiggins never moved from first base" (Walsh, *Sunday Times*, Sport p18, June 8, 2014). In a piece reflecting on Wiggins' retirement, Walsh uses strong terms when describing Wiggins' 2012 Tour de France victory: "That victory is tainted, diminished, and when you're done wrestling with the issues thrown up by his team's application for therapeutic use exemptions (TUEs) on his behalf, you just want to throw the 2012 Tour de France victory into the bin and wish it had never happened" (Walsh, *Sunday Times*, Sport p16, January 1, 2017). Walsh reiterates the fact that Wiggins received triamcinolone injections ahead of the 2011 and 2012 Tour de France and the 2013 Giro d'Italia after Brailsford approved the TUE applications. Walsh then makes no attempt to conceal his contempt, asserting that "the dates of the injections are damning" and that "they were timed to help Wiggins win the Tour de France", before adding:

In 2012, with 40mg of triamcinolone coursing through his veins, Wiggins won the Tour de France. He became the first Briton to win the world's greatest bike race but it was the costliest victory of his career. He joked in a recent message on social media that no one could take away what he had. In a sense, he's right. It's already gone. He still has the money, the titles, the medals but no longer the respect. Many fans feel they have been duped.... A great but damaged actor has left the theatre, through a back door (ibid.).

In another indication that Walsh remained wedded to the principle of journalistic impartiality and his sense of professional duty during his time with the team, Walsh describes towards the end of *Inside Team Sky* how he pursued and broke the story about how a new member of

the team, Jonathan Tiernan-Locke, was being investigated for suspicious blood values deriving from his period with another team (2013: 307-309). He published this piece in the September of 2013 (Walsh, *Sunday Times*, Sport p9, September 29, 2013), and then saw the story through by reporting the eight-month investigation's conclusion which resulted in Tiernan-Locke being banned for two years (Walsh, *Sunday Times*, Sport p15, July 20, 2014). Walsh admitted that initially reporting on the investigation into Tiernan-Locke gave him "shivers of déjà vu" and, perhaps jarringly, added that, "These are not pleasant things to write about at any time, and especially not after a summer in the sun" (2013: 323), a choice of expression that suggests his time over the summer with Team Sky had made it emotionally harder for him to report 'bad' news about them.

Two-thirds of the way through *Inside Team Sky* Walsh offers something of a definition of what he regards as sound journalistic method for an investigation. By its own terms, his spell inside Team Sky could be justified:

You go into the background, test the transparency, test the substance of the people involved, find out what they do when we are not looking. When Bradley Wiggins speaks to me about doping in the context of letting his children down, when he speaks as the child of a man and dooper who let *him* down, I hear somebody who has weighed the cost of cheating and found it excessive. That doesn't end of curiosity but it informs my conclusions (2013: 226).

Walsh makes an intriguing analogy when describing his approach to investigating cycling's – and Team Sky's – claim to being clean. He is, he says, like Jesus's disciple Thomas, who was only able to believe in Christ's resurrection when he was able to see and touch Jesus's wounds (2013: 329-330). He is unable to make a leap faith, or to go on anything other than personal, empirical verification. Like Thomas:

I need to put my finger on the scar left by the EPO needle. To speak to someone with more than just a gut feeling. I came to Team Sky after more than a decade fishing in the toxic world of Lance. I came with the stories of Tyler Hamilton and Floyd Landis in my bloodstream. The first thing that occurred to me was that no team operating like

Lance's teams operated could ever afford to invite a journalist into the tent. Too much to keep hidden (2013: 330).

In some passages of *Inside Team Sky*, Walsh lapses into the descriptive rather than the reflective. Rather than questioning the professional implications of his being on 'the inside' and receiving such access, he instead emphasizes the plain facts of his status as an insider. In one section, Walsh describes how – mid-Tour – he was sitting with two members of Team Sky's senior management team as they discussed the outcome of a stage:

I sit silently, letting two of the best brains in the business air their thoughts, hopes and nerves without interruption. As I look out upon Auvergne's hills and pastures, post-stage analysis as my soundtrack, I am acutely aware of the access I am enjoying. Other journalists will now return to their hotels for another round of dinner, sleep and breakfast with only their speculations to cling on to between stages and press events. Instead, I live among the riders, coaches and managers, mechanics and carers that keep this team in the yellow jersey, following the Tour from inside Team Sky (2013: 190) .

The word "enjoying" is a curious – and potentially ambivalent – choice. Is it enjoyment in the sense of having fun, or enjoyment in the sense of appreciating the close-up access? There is also the sense that Walsh believes he is receiving something more tangible than other journalists; while fellow journalists fumble with speculation he, Walsh, has the privilege of incontrovertible, first-hand insight. But the foundational question is just how pure that insight is, given the partial surrendering of journalistic autonomy that has occurred.

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

In the house of Team Sky I have looked around. I have asked the questions. Done the journalism I came to do. Nobody has given me a secret handshake or password signifying membership of the Masonic Lodge of Supreme Wizard Murdoch. Nobody



has slammed doors in my face. And I have concluded that Chris Froome exists within Team Sky because he is an almost unstoppable force, one of those freak talents which, against all odds, somehow bubbles to the top (2013: 193).

A similar tenor is struck 40 pages later, where Walsh acknowledges that his own professional standing was questioned as a consequence of his decision to live and work alongside the team:

I was aware that their reputations weren't the only ones at stake. My reputation was impugned from the time I decided to see what was on the inside. But, on the inside, I found nothing that sent alarm bells ringing. I found no doors locked. I used my senses. And more importantly I used some sense. I had a lot to lose, so I needed to (2013: 233).

What constitutes this journalistic "sense", however, is not explicated. At times, Walsh admits to having been assailed by doubts regarding the legitimacy of his reporting technique. Towards the end of the book, Walsh looks back on the talk Brailsford gave to the team on the eve of the Tour, which focused on how to deal with the media:

Perhaps no one else on the team bus that evening paid much attention to that little piece of advice, but it sent a small shiver down my spine. What was I doing on this side of the fence, listening to these Clintonesque definitions of openness and transparency? Had I become part of Team Sky's world of controlled controllables? (2013, 305-306)

Walsh is frank in the book about the criticism he faced on social media about his decision to go inside Team Sky. Comments on Twitter questioned his integrity, focusing on a perceived lack of both independence and requisite scepticism. Walsh himself provides a selection of examples (2013: 306), including "@DavidWalshST Do you still believe this fairytale? Or maybe Murdoch tells you to"; "David you've become Sky's bitch. Seriously thought you had more sense"; and "So D Walsh of the Sunday Times (prop. R Murdoch) investigated Team Sky (prop. R Murdoch) and gave them the OK? #laughter". His retort in the book is that, far from

compromising him, Team Sky's offer provided him with a powerful means of continuing to investigate the sport he had covered for so long: "If – after a lifetime of fighting for transparency and honesty in cycling – the top team in the sport was inviting me to come in and look wherever I wanted to look, I would be failing as a journalist not to pick up my magnifying glass and deerstalker and join them" (Walsh 2013: 307). Having discharged what he regarded as this journalistic duty, Walsh admits that a positive report about Team Sky would be perceived by some as proof of his complicity:

The most frightening thing, ironically, was the prospect of not finding anything. To take the abuse and the insults to my integrity and then give Team Sky a broadly clean bill of health was going to be grist to the mill of the online detractors. That's how it panned out however, and I had finished the coverage of the Tour de France with a long piece in the *Sunday Times* expressing my view that Chris Froome was a winner in whom we could believe. For some, this expression of belief in Froome was treachery (2013: 207).

Walsh delivers his verdict on Team Sky in the Epilogue. It does contain a qualification, but it is nevertheless a firm affirmation:

After all that has gone before, cycling more than any other sport needs to offer some hope, some proof of integrity. I believe I found that. Everybody else can make up their own mind... I didn't find an organisation which always lives up to the billing it provides for itself, but Team Sky try (2013: 322-323).

But a more resounding, and in some ways fawning, verdict comes in the Acknowledgements. Recounting the hard work put in by Team Sky, from management down to mechanics, Walsh provides a gushing vote of thanks: "For their welcome and their company and their help, for helping me to believe again in professional cycling, I thank each and every one of them" (2013: 336). The tone of this potentially taints Walsh's whole enterprise with Team Sky and is in conflict with the autonomous, duty-bound ethics of his Armstrong period. Further signs of undue closeness are arguably provided through Walsh's enduring closeness with Chris Froome, who was Team Sky's principal rider – and Tour de France winner – in 2013. In January

2014, Walsh wrote a piece for the *Sunday Times's* magazine sub-headed "Chris Froome, the British cyclist who won the Tour de France last year, grew up in Kenya. David Walsh joined him as he took the yellow jersey home" (Walsh, *Sunday Times*, Magazine pp40-47). Walsh describes spending time with Froome and his fiancée in the Maasai Mara, and paints a vignette that presents Froome as something of a relaxed nature-lover rather than the hard-nosed professional cyclist of the sports pages: "He [Froome] photographs an elephant as it kicks a clump of scrub grass free before catching it with his trunk before devouring it. On the banks of the Mara River, he fishes 50 yards from where 20 hippos chill in the water" (ibid.). Moreover, Walsh agreed to ghost write Froome's 2014 autobiography, *The Climb*, and in a 2015 interview defended his decision to do so, arguing that Armstrong's behaviour should not serve as an automatic taint on all subsequent cyclists: "At this point in the Armstrong story I had six people in the team saying he had doped, and loads of evidence. With Froome, nothing. So what am I supposed to do? Make it up? Just so I can seem like a real tough guy who believes in nothing when I think there is a really decent basis for trusting Sky and Froome?" (Bailey, 2015).

Walsh's decision to accept an invitation to spend time with Team Sky is arguably a case study in its own right about sports journalism ethics. It has highlighted how the Kantian journalistic duty to pursue and publish the truth is potentially incompatible with the embedding process, despite there being scope for acknowledging that the integrity of Walsh's work was not irrecoverably undermined by the embedding. The independence – or autonomy – of sports journalists is a key issue raised by Walsh's embedding, along with the associated point of how best to access the truth.

#### *2.4.6 Enthusiasm in Sports Journalism*

Another way of expressing Boyle's claim that sports journalists can "travel too close to the circus" (Boyle, 2006b) is to say that sports journalists can be too enthusiastic about the sports that they cover as part of their work, and that this enthusiasm has the potential to blind them to hard-headed inquiry. The notion of enthusiasm contaminating a sports journalist's practice is one that Walsh is alert to:

Most of us have chosen journalism because we love sport. We say we love our jobs but it is getting paid for going to big sporting events that we love. Enthusiasm for the game is what drives our work. When doubts about the worth of the performance arise, they drain our enthusiasm.

This is why so many refuse to ask the obvious questions.

I was lucky when it came to Lance Armstrong.... At the 1999 Tour when the story of Lance Armstrong first announced itself, my enthusiasm for professional cycling was at a very low ebb.

Lance, Tour champion extraordinaire, came into my journalistic life at precisely the right moment (Walsh, 2012: 24).

The notion of a person or opportunity entering the sports journalist's orbit at the right time finds a resonance in Walsh's reflections on his opportunity to be embedded with Team Sky. In his Epilogue to *Inside Team Sky*, Walsh writes that he had initially been in "two minds" over Sky's offer, but admits his desire to rekindle his affection for the sport after years of exposing its tainted past was a powerful factor. Importantly, his personal – rather than professional – needs are what are emphasised:

If Team Sky was all that Dave Brailsford said it was, then the time spent with them would refresh the palate and flush the bad taste left by the Lance years. In truth, I was keen to fall in love with the sport again. On the other hand there was the fear of disappointment. Finding or even suspecting that Brailsford was running the cycling equivalent of a speakeasy presented no journalistic difficulties, but personally to see the sport screwing its people all over again would have been too much (Walsh, 2013: 322).

Walsh's desire to have his enthusiasm restored – to believe in the sport again – is evident. The question that arises is whether his time with Team Sky was therefore more personal quest than professional assignment; and, if so, whether that presents an ethical contamination of Walsh's coverage of the 2013 Tour.

#### 2.4.7 Cynicism Versus Scepticism

As has been discussed, Walsh poses the question of how “a proper journalist” should respond in situations that pose ethically troublesome dilemmas. Connected to this is the theme in Walsh’s writings of the stance that sports journalists should adopt when investigating issues: should they be sceptical or cynical? The tension between scepticism versus cynicism is a theme that permeates *Inside Team Sky*. Walsh repeatedly describes himself as “sceptical” (2013: 33; 2013: 221). While legitimate scepticism is seen as a *sine qua non* for the journalist, cynicism is perceived as an illegitimate quality, even serving to diminish the capacity to distinguish truth. Writing in *Inside Team Sky* of the accusations made against Froome by his detractors, Walsh says:

It may transpire in years to come that some of these things which you believe to be true are actually true. I don’t think they will, but it would be derelict today for any journalist not to ask questions. Yet to close the mind off to the possibility that this is an interesting man, a man with a great story and an outlier in his sport – that would be to let Lance Armstrong win twice. That would be to let Lance’s toxic cynicism enter your skin (2013: 175).

Scepticism, according to this passage, is healthy – to be without it would be a dereliction of journalistic duty because it would inhibit questions and thereby potentially allow truth to go uncovered. But cynicism can also suppress the truth too, by making the mind tunnel-visioned in its assumption of wrong-doing. However, Walsh claims that cynicism can come in another guise, too. For Walsh, failing to pursue lines of enquiry as a journalist and instead opting for the path of journalistic least resistance is a form of cynicism. Rephrased in the Kantian idiom, pursuing the journalistic hypothetical imperative for the sake of professional pragmatism is in itself cynical. Describing how journalists he knew well did not want him in their car on the 2004 Tour de France for fear that his presence would hamper their ability to get quotes and access to Armstrong, Walsh told *Press Gazette*:

To me that was an act of cynicism, and in a way I was the romantic who believed you could get to the truth... People always used to say that I was a cynic. You might find

this strange, but I'm the only one who isn't cynical, because all the guys who had a sense that he was cheating but thought it was too much trouble to investigate it, that it would make their lives messy – to me they are the cynics (Pugh, 2012).

This is an instance of journalists casting one of their own out through fear of being tainted by association with him. As such, it can be seen that pursuing the professional pragmatism inherent in the journalistic hypothetical imperative can have the consequence of journalists even isolating one of their own number. Staying true to his own sense of journalistic duty therefore came at considerable cost to Walsh, as was acknowledged in his citation for the Sports Journalist of the Year Award that he received at the British Journalism Awards in 2012, in which the judges stated: "David Walsh became a pariah for years in his chosen sport in order to get to the truth of the story" (Sunday Times, Sport p15, December 9, 2012). He also won the overall Journalist of the Year Award, with that citation again emphasising the risk that was contained in his stance: "His investigation was dogged, determined and brave. He could have lost everything but persisted against the odds" (ibid.).

The theme of cynicism – and the danger of it contaminating not only sports journalism but sports audiences – is one to which Walsh returned. In his interview with the BBC's HARDtalk programme, Walsh adopted a strong tone when asked about people who say they cannot watch sport anymore, particularly cycling, because it is tainted by past doping:

That's my definition of cynicism because it starts from the presumption that they're all cheating... What happens if somebody who's clean is winning the Tour de France, but you have a preconception that they're all cheats, so you brand him a cheat without having any evidence that he's a cheat, without any knowledge, without any insight, without anything? That to me is cynicism and I would fight as much against cynicism as I would against people who dope (BBC, 2017: 22.27-23.00).

In the same interview, Walsh also took a combative stance when asked by Sackur to justify his consistently supportive writings about Froome. It is the stance of the autonomous Kantian, who believes he is duty-bound to convey what he earnestly believes to be the truth in order to preserve the currency of truth and defeat cynicism:

Sackur: One of the most interesting things about this whole ethical moral morass that you've entered and been in for so long now is your decision to be so harsh on what we now know about Bradley Wiggins but still to maintain as far as you're concerned, and your personal knowledge of the man, that Chris Froome... is in your view a man that you will always vouch for... Have you not learned anything from your past experiences?

Walsh: What would you like me to say? 'I really believe in Chris Froome but it would be prudent of me to hedge my bets here'. That's not my nature, I'm not going to do it (BBC, 2017: 15.42-16.51).

In addition, this exchange poses questions around Bell's theory of journalistic attachment raised above. Should sports journalists seek to remain neutral when reporting on sports news stories, even when it is their strongly-held and considered belief that someone is being maligned or even victimised? It was a question posed in a different journalistic setting by Bell, but this case study suggests Walsh himself delivered a journalism of attachment in his stance on Froome.

#### *2.4.8 The Dynamics of Collusion and Self-Censorship in Sports Journalism*

Walsh's career illustrates the complexities of journalistic positioning, where positioning is understood as the editorial posture adopted by a sports journalist towards individuals and organisations in order to gather stories about them. There are various dichotomies that can be used to capture the contrasting positions adopted by Walsh – outsider versus insider; unattached versus embedded; independent versus dependent – and what they feed into is an emerging picture of potential gradations of collusion. Cycling is a sport where journalistic collusion is arguably more pronounced than in most others. Considering the literature away from David Walsh, cycling journalist Jeremy Whittle has written about the collusion that can occur between the reporters and the reported, with the following section from his 'warts-and-all' book *Bad Blood* containing a compelling – and alarming – punchline:

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, develops friendships with their families and – in one case I know of – transport their drugs for them (Whittle, 2009: 5).

The phenomenon of collusion between the reporter and the reported that results in a form of self-censorship by the former that provides cover for the latter arguably occurs across the spectrum of different forms of journalism, from politics and war reporting to entertainment and sport. Both Paxman (2016: 160) and Marr (2004) refer to the dangers of political reporters becoming too close – and operating in the same orbit, or ‘bubble’ – as the politicians they seek to report on, while in the context of war reporting Harcup refers to reporters who have been embedded with regiments going on to feel “disquiet at the way they came to identify with the members of the armed forces among whom they were living and upon whom they relied for protection” (2014: 94). The 2017 scandal around the Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein also brought accusations of complicity from within the US media of the way the American entertainment media had collectively behaved. In the context of the Weinstein scandal, Ryan Holiday, the editor-at-large of the *New York Observer*, posed the question: “How did the collective press – the Hollywood, media, gossip and business journalists who follow every move of these power players as part of their *job* – miss this so badly?” (Holiday, 2017). His response is that they did not miss it, but that “They had the story, they were just too cowardly to publish it” (ibid.). Another way of expressing this would be to state that journalists self-censored out of fear. Holiday continues:



The media is “full of frauds”, according to this excoriation of the mainstream media’s ethics, with self-censorship the unnamed facilitator of this fraudulence. The question that then arises in connection with this case study and the wider research project is the extent to which cycling journalism – and sports journalism more generally – is an instance of this media fraudulence. Interestingly, the concept of *omerta* referred to by Walsh is one that, on wider reading, recurs in the literature on cycling. The widespread use of this concept – with its connotations of illicit dealing, closed ranks and silent, corrupt obedience – suggests that fraudulence is, perhaps, a term not without legitimate application.

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 from this case study into the wider literature review contained in the next chapter. The study considers issues of self-censorship without explicitly using the term, instead referring in one instance to reporters “exercising discretion” (Sefiha, 2010: 209). The extent to which exposing 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 the *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 is tantamount to being blackballed 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-by-day basis:

A Belgian investigative sports reporter who also writes about doping indicated that, “After writing that story (which revealed doping practices among a Belgian cycling team) I know that (now) I can’t go to the Panaracer (team) bus anymore, probably

ever again. I know they won't talk to me." For these and other cycling journalists that have written doping related stories, the loss of reliable sources within the community has seriously compromised their ability to provide daily cycling coverage (Sefiha 2010: 209).

While not invoking the deontological-consequentialist dichotomy of moral philosophy that informs this chapter, Sefiha indicates that many journalists on the magazine he studied took a consequentialist (that is, trying to calculate the consequences of an action) 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 consequentialist thinking, with some journalists conducting what could be termed their own professional version of Jeremy Bentham's felicific calculus (1823), 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 them: "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). Editorial decision-making by a process of cost-benefit analysis is the opposite of the *journalistic categorical imperative* discussed above, and creates the possibility of fraudulence. If the likely costs of revealing the truth are perceived to be too great (the withdrawal of access and professional isolation, for example) then the truth will go unreported and therefore unknown.

While tensions around day-to-day ‘beat’ reporting and investigative reporting can potentially be defused by a “division of labor” between the two, Sefiha suggests that the diminishing resources caused by the contraction in many print newsrooms renders such a division impossible, with reporters instead having to “adopt multiple occupational duties” (Sefiha, 2010: 213). As he concludes: “Without these resources *Bikesport* writers must occupy multiple journalistic positions: part investigative reporter, part beat writer, part op-ed writer... these roles are often in conflict” (ibid.).

Here, the suggestion is that diminishing resources compromise output. The more that is asked of sports journalists in terms of roles, the more carefully they need to tread out of fear of alienating contacts. *Omerta* arguably exerts a greater influence when resources are limited and reducing.

The writings of professional cyclist-turned-journalist Paul Kimmage are also pertinent when considering not only Walsh’s work but wider issues around the flow of information produced by sports journalists. Like Walsh and Whittle, Kimmage invokes the spectre of *omerta*. His autobiographical account of his years as a professional cyclist – and his gradual revolt against the drugs culture that he encountered within it – touches on themes of self-censorship. Firstly, there is the self-censorship of the professional riders who are aware of the drugs culture within the peloton but who do not speak out; then there is the self-censorship of the journalists covering the sport, who have their suspicions but decide instead to focus on narratives of glory and heroism. The first quote below highlights the former type of self-censorship in relation to cycling, the second quote the latter:

The law of silence: it exists not only in the Mafia but also in the peloton. Those who break the law, who talk to the press about the dope problem in the sport are despised. They are branded as having ‘*crache dans la soupe*’, they have ‘spat in the soup’. In writing this book I have broken the law of silence (Kimmage, 2007: 229).

One of my biggest criticisms of *L’Equipe* and of the French cycling press in general is that they never talk to people like Andre [a lesser-known, but interesting, cyclist in the

peloton]. The absence of adequate [doping] controls in France is common knowledge, but rarely highlighted. The papers and magazines know about the problems but choose instead to fill their column inches with portraits of the stars – of present ‘greats’ (Kimmage, 2007: 244).

Kimmage’s frustration with the press is expressed even more directly. The press room of the 2006 Tour de France, he writes, comprises “mostly fans with typewriters” (Kimmage, 2007: 280). A page later, he then refers to fellow journalists as “The Muppet Show” as he describes their behaviour following the announcement of the withdrawal from the race of a number of big names due to a doping investigation (Kimmage, 2007: 281). Kimmage’s “Muppet Show” remark resonates with Walsh’s description of the press room being “crammed to dangerous levels with sycophants and time servers” (2012: 88). Both, at various points in their writings, are scathing about what they perceive as their fellow journalists’ spinelessness, almost to the point of provocation. When the self-censorship deriving from cycling’s *omerta* is broken, then Walsh and Kimmage show the words can be fierce. It is as though the journalists are at pains to emphasise their moral autonomy, as distinct from the pack’s indolent credulity.

### 2.5 Case Study Conclusion

This case study of David Walsh has highlighted a number of key areas for further research in the field of sports journalism ethics. Principally, it has highlighted how issues of self-censorship are central to the ethics of sports journalism, and how the integrity – or indeed the fraudulence – of the profession can arguably be measured by the extent to which its practitioners self-censor, whether that be through the self-censoring of *information* or *opinion* that is contained in published material or the self-censoring of *questions*. The case study has illustrated how issues of self-censorship are connected to issues of journalism distance/closeness, and epistemological issues of accessing the truth. Walsh’s own career has also been shown to be an instructive one to analyse from the perspective of deontology, with his work shifting between an apparently firm adherence to a duty-based approach to his profession to an instance – being embedded with Team Sky – of him potentially surrendering the professional autonomy required for journalistic impartiality and duty-based reporting. Walsh’s own sense of personal, emotional involvement in his sports journalism is also

captured. The accompanying analysis of the writings by other cycling journalists, such as Whittle and Kimmage, and how they connect with Walsh's, has reinforced the notion of self-censorship being an important means of interrogating sports journalism's integrity. However, not covered in detail by the case study is how these issues of sports media ethics – of self-censorship, duty, accessing the truth, and personal engagement – translate explicitly into a digital, social media-driven media landscape. It is to examining this networked, social media age that this project now turns, with a Literature Review that considers, among other things, how many of the ethical issues raised by this case study of David Walsh transpose into the digital era.

## **Chapter 3 – Literature Review**

### *3.1: Overview*

The previous chapter served as a gateway to this literature review, touching upon themes, issues and contexts that will now be examined in greater detail. The existing body of literature – both academic and, where pertinent, journalistic – will be considered and distilled. In the course of the David Walsh case study, issues of self-censorship in sports journalism were discussed and some of the literature around it analysed. This chapter will look more broadly at media self-censorship, and this survey and crystallisation will reinforce the need for more research into it in the sphere of sports media. Self-censorship is not a concept that exists in isolation, and – as highlighted in the previous chapter – it connects closely with fundamental ethical and epistemological concepts such as truth and objectivity. These concepts themselves connect with wider issues of media ethics, and will be explicated and explored in this review. Modern incarnations of these debates focus around post-truth journalism, fake news and clickbait, and these too will receive close attention. This discussion will take place within a wider examination of sports journalism ethics, feeding into the ongoing debate about the relevance and impact of codes of practice. The review of the literature around codes will illustrate how closely codes can be connected with notions of journalistic professional identity. This chapter aims to illustrate how more research is needed across these areas, and therefore the timeliness of this investigation into the research objectives of:

RO1) To understand the extent to which sports journalists self-censor and how this could compromise their journalistic activity.

RO2) To identify and examine common ethical challenges experienced by British sports journalists in the course of their professional work in the modern digital media landscape.

RO3) To explore the relevance and impact of codes of conduct on sports journalists' practice.

RO4) To capture the lived professional experience of modern sports journalists in the UK in the digital era and the implications of this for sports journalists' professional identity.

At the outset of this chapter, however, it is an important contextual point that UK sports journalism is not necessarily a morass of ethical failings, hesitation, cowardice and editorial superficiality; the starting point of this project is not one of sports journalism being an industry that, as a whole, 'needs to put its house in order'. Following on from Walsh's work exposing Armstrong, there have been numerous instances in recent times of UK sports journalists unearthing important public interest stories that have transcended sport. One example is the award-winning reporting on abuse in football by Daniel Taylor, then of *The Guardian* and now a staff writer for *The Athletic*. Taylor's reporting in 2017 led to hundreds of historical allegations of sexual abuse being made and a renewed focus across society on child protection (Guardian Sport, 2017). Indeed, following scandals of governance and of doping in football, cycling and athletics – many of which were exposed by British journalists – some media commentators have heralded a "new era of investigative reporting" (Jewell, 2016), and a Parliamentary committee has praised UK sports reporters' investigative work into doping (Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2018: 9). Others, on the other hand, have claimed that scandals were not broken sooner due to sports journalists being too worried about ruining their relationships with contacts (MacKenzie, 2016). Accusations of sports journalists effectively being complicit in cover-ups and lacking professional integrity have been made from within the profession (Jennings, 2012; Miller, 2015; Ponsford, 2010). While there are shortcomings within sports journalism, as there are in any industry, it is an important fact to be borne in mind at the start of this review that contemporary sports journalism has advocates as well as detractors on the issue of ethical and editorial integrity.

To begin with, this chapter sets out the changing digital environment as it affects sports media, and discusses how traditional questions of sports journalism ethics are affected by the new digital media ecosystem. This builds on the work of the previous chapter's case study, which was largely without reference to digital technology and digital platforms, with the notable exception of Walsh referring to criticism and abuse he received on Twitter.

### 3.2: "Networked Media Sport" and Blurred Lines

The growth in digital technology has brought about a new paradigm within which Western society communicates and interacts (Castells, 2001 and 2004), and this has given rise to what

has been called *networked media sport*, “a term capturing the movement away from broadcast and print media towards digitized content distributed via networked communications technologies” (Hutchins and Rowe, 2012: 46). The rise of this “information technology paradigm” (Castells, 2000) has posed fresh ethical issues for the news media, ranging from the speed at which content is gathered and distributed, to the spread of misinformation and emotionally manipulative content (Ball, 2017; Ess, 2009; Hermida, 2016), which in turn has raised questions about the limits of free expression and internet regulation (Bell, 2017; Bradshaw, 2017; Viner, 2016). As the “media sport economy” has shifted from the scarcity of the analogue era to the plenitude of the digital era (Rowe and Hutchins, 2013: 2), sports journalism has not been immune from the fresh ethical questions posed by the digital revolution (Boyle, 2006a and 2017), and instances of the mainstream media being duped by fake sports content have occurred (Corcoran, 2014). Indeed, sports journalism could potentially feel the ethical ramifications of the digital era more acutely than other spheres of journalism due to sports departments being regarded by some as “laboratories” for the implementation of new newsroom technology and practices (McGuire and Murray, 2016: 59). As Boyle has noted, sports journalism has often been the branch of journalism that has been at the vanguard of digital adaptation (Boyle, 2017). Moreover, it has been contended that a combination of jointly reinforcing factors, including alterations to journalistic routines and changes in digital technology, have put members of sports journalism’s community of practice under strain (Hutchins and Boyle, 2017). However, it can be contended that the growth of digital technology has not posed completely new ethical questions for sports journalism, but instead cast older questions – for example, those around verification, objectivity, the fair expression of comment, and impartiality – in a new, digitally-tinged light (Cairns, 2018).

In parallel with the emergence of these ethical issues, the digital revolution’s 24-hour, interactive media ecosystem has arguably blurred – or even undermined – the professional identity of sports journalists, due to factors including a more visibly active audience that includes citizen journalists (Fenton and Witschge, 2011), and a burgeoning and more controlling sports media relations sector (Gibbs and Haynes, 2013; Grimmer, 2017). Indeed, the very emergence of terms such as ‘citizen journalist’, ‘prosumers’, ‘blogger’ and ‘user-generated content’ suggests that the line between journalist and audience is now significantly less distinct than it once was (Harcup, 2015; Knight and Cook, 2015). Practitioners within the



mainstream sports media have found themselves operating within an online habitat that contains a significant – and growing – number of non-professional bloggers and content producers, and as a consequence have been forced to re-examine their professional worth and their relationship with their audiences (Boyle and Haynes, 2013; McEnnis 2013, 2015 and 2017). The growth of Twitter and other channels of digital communication mean that traditional media organisations no longer filter and control the flow of sports information, and that the traditional “sports media hierarchy”, according to which sports journalists distributed content to their audiences in a top-down fashion, has been flattened: “What was once a one-way mode of communication... is now a two-way mode of communication that represents a form of departure from traditional models” (Gibbs and Haynes, 2013: 405-406). Top-level football organisations have evolved into sports and media businesses (Grimmer, 2017), while elite sports organisations have eschewed the once-symbiotic relationship between themselves and the independent media, with their communications teams now instead using digital platforms to deliver their own content couched in corporately beneficial narratives ( Simultaneously, there has been debate about the scope and relevance of journalistic codes of practice and regulation, with sports journalism regulation receiving a growing amount of attention (Bradshaw and Minogue, 2018; McEnnis, 2018; Ramon-Vegas and Rojas-Torrijos, 2018). However, the manner in which questions about sports journalists’ professional identity intersect with questions around regulation and social media arguably needs to be explicated further, so that an understanding of contemporary sports journalists’ professional identity and their lived experience can be appreciated more fully.

### *3.3: Textbook Lacuna*

Additionally, a review of the recent academic textbooks that have been produced by practising sports journalists suggests that issues of ethics are low down the list when it comes to training priorities for the next generation of sports journalists. There is an expanding range of such undergraduate and postgraduate textbooks (Andrews, 2014; Lambert, 2018b; Steen, 2014; Toney, 2013), but their treatment of ethical issues ranges from brief to negligible. This suggests that the profile of sports journalism ethics in the digital age needs to be raised among practitioners and aspiring sports journalists. A recent textbook, of which I was principal

author, has however adopted a more explicit focus on sports journalism ethics (Bradshaw and Minogue, 2020).

### *3.4: Sports Journalism Ethics – A Summary*

Like medical ethics or business ethics, media ethics is a species of applied ethics, and it can be defined as “the philosophical study of morality in the context of media institutions and professional practice, including the ethics of media content” (Sanford Horner, 2015: 5). Journalism ethics can be viewed as a sub-species of this, with sports journalism a further sub-division. This study focuses more on individual moral agency than media institutions, and takes Harcup’s definition of journalistic ethics as a useful starting point for capturing this: “the ideas of right and wrong that may inform the work of journalists either formally or informally” (2014: 95). Such a definition is useful for the study because it identifies that moral constraints or influences can be formal and external (such as in a code) or can be less obvious, implicit and internal, a distinction which resonates around the issue of self-censorship.

As the Leveson Inquiry (2012) and previous government-backed commissions and inquiries into media standards have highlighted, there is a large number of ethical issues which journalists’ decisions and actions touch upon (Harcup, 2007). Accuracy, sensationalism, privacy and subterfuge are among the recurring areas where journalists’ ethical decisions are under scrutiny, and where it has been concluded that they have displayed serious shortcomings (Davies, 2008). However, these are not the only prisms through which journalists’ behaviours and decisions can be analysed, and in sports journalism specifically the notion of journalists’ complicity, collusion and cosiness with their sources and subjects has been a recurring one (Boyle, 2006a and 2006b; Sugden and Tomlinson, 2007). Underpinning these notions, if implicitly, has been the concept of self-censorship, and it is this through the lens of potential self-censorship that this thesis seeks to examine journalists’ decisions.

Ethical issues confront sports journalists working for local, regional, national and international news organisations (Boyle, 2006a; Cairns, 2018; Harcup, 2007), and these ethical dilemmas can occur when covering even the most trivial-seeming of grassroots matches. Should, for example, a local newspaper report that a local under-nines football side lost 29-0? When the

*Derbyshire Times* did print such a result, it caused the local Junior Sunday League to order clubs not to tell the press about matches in which a side lost by more than 14 goals (Harcup, 2007: 2). This case, while somewhat dated now, illustrates how truth-telling, tensions with sources and possible motivations for self-censorship can arise even in the most mundane of sports journalistic activities. Similar tensions are evident in the coverage of elite professional sport (Boyle, 2006a). In his classic monograph examining issues affecting modern sports journalism practice, Boyle contends that the closeness of the relationship between sports journalists and many of the organisations that they cover means they run the risk of producing content that is “complicit” with those organisations’ aims. Boyle refers to this as the danger of “travelling too close to the circus” and suggests a need for the sports media to “run away from the circus” (Boyle, 2006b). Sugden and Tomlinson (2007) also consider the complicity potentially involved in sports journalists’ relationships with both their subjects and sources, arguing that a “collusive dynamic” exists, while Rowe (2005, 2007) has suggested that sports journalists have performed a “cheerleading” function rather than that of watchdog. A connected phenomenon – the increasing reliance by journalists on material provided by public relations departments, and the attendant disregard for verification – has been labelled “churnalism” by Davies (2008) and an extreme form of the activity has resulted in at least one sports writer being suspended from his role (Biasotti, 2015).

Rowe (2007), in considering whether there is substance to the claim that the sports desk is the “toy department” of the newsroom, argues that the closeness of relationship between sports reporter and their subject is symptomatic of the one-dimensional, intellectually impoverished form of journalism that sports journalists provide. He accuses the sports media of:

an excessively close integration with the sports industry, a lack of critical ambition, and an unimaginative reliance on socially and politically de-contextualized preview, description and retrospection regarding sporting events. When sources are used, they tend to be drawn from the ranks of celebrity athletes, coaches and administrators, thus further isolating the sports desk from the world beyond sport. The key question is, therefore, not whether sports journalism is, indeed, the toy department of the news media, but whether its controllers and practitioners are content to operate

within the self-imposed and isolating limits that leave it continually open to professional challenge and even contempt (Rowe, 2007: 400-401).

The allegation of “self-imposed and isolating limits” is a significant one, because it raises both ethical and epistemological questions about sports journalism. If sports journalists are, as Rowe suggests, complacently operating within a narrow world largely of their own creation, then how can they be getting to the truth? And if the nature of their working practices means they can’t get to ‘the truth’, then how can they be fulfilling the first criterion of almost every code of editorial practice, which is to report accurately? Elsewhere, in a co-authored paper, Rowe returns to this topic, posing the hypothesis of *ghettoization* by asking: “Has the sports desk been ghettoized, insulating itself from the wider concerns and contexts with which it should be engaged?” (Boyle, Rowe and Whannel, 2010: 247).

The description of the sports desk being the “toy department” of the news media was used in the obituary of the mid-20th century American sports columnist Jimmy Cannon (Anderson, 1973) and has been widely considered since then (Boyle, 2006b; Bradshaw and Minogue, 2020; Rowe and Whannel, 2010: 246; Hardin, Zhong and Whiteside, 2009; Humphries, 2003; Morrison, 2014). McEnnis adds fresh nuance to the characterisation by suggesting the possible existence of a “toy department within the toy department”, according to which journalists with a legacy media background seek to elevate their own position by regarding online colleagues as a discrete toy department (2018b). One way of considering the legitimacy or otherwise of the “toy department” tag is to consider the extent to which sports journalists have “compromised their own occupational standing by failing to discharge their ‘fourth estate’ duties of independence, inquiry and, where necessary, sustained critique” (Boyle, Rowe and Whannel, 2010; 247). In this same paper, the authors return to this issue by referring to “the distinction between the role of the critical, fourth estate watchdog and that of the ‘star struck’, even sycophantic fan” (Boyle, Rowe and Whannel, 2010; 249). This contrast is arguably too stark in its binary formulation, and potential gradations need to be explored.

Similarly, rather than fulfilling a serious, public service function that holds the powerful in sport to account and probes the deeper issues of sport, Rowe (2004) has accused sports

journalists of being “cheerleaders”. He frames the debate by invoking the distinction of cheerleading journalist and crusading journalist. While the crusader carries out investigative work and is not perpetually on the merry-go-round of match previews and reports, the cheerleader fulfils the more superficial function of “describing sports events and passing on news about them rather than interrogating and probing their subject with vigour” (Rowe, 2004: 51). However, it is not always clear that the distinction is a sound one with enduring relevance, due to some sports journalistic activities not obviously falling under one concept rather than the other, such as live blogging, which is often more nuanced than just a blow-by-blow account of the action (McEnnis, 2015). Elsewhere, English has investigated the issue of cheerleading through a combination of interviews with cricket journalists and a content analysis of their work, and concluded that critical content outweighed cheerleading content (English, 2017).

It has been contended that some sports are more prone to journalistic cheerleading than others (Humphries, 2003). This claim has been made from inside the industry, with Humphries having referred to a significant proportion of Formula One journalists being literal “fans with typewriters”. It is, he has claimed, “virtually impossible to cover the sport decently and honestly as the corporate hospitality is almost everywhere and the cost of getting around from race to race is prohibitive” (Humphries, 2003: 118). Elsewhere in the same book, the author states as his credo the position that sports journalists should not only eschew cheerleading but seek to undermine false pom-pom-waving: “I think a large part of sports journalism should be the extinguishing of flammable hype” (Humphries, 2003: 349). 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). In the UK, some of the most withering accusations of cheerleading have come from within the industry itself. Andrew Jennings, a freelance investigative sports journalist who has exposed corruption on the International Olympic Committee and at FIFA, has questioned the integrity and quality of sports journalists on numerous occasions (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 which Jennings recalls attending a FIFA press conference in Zurich, encapsulates his attitude to many within his industry:

I'm surrounded by all these terribly posh reporters in suits and silk ties and buttoned up shirts, for God's sake... And here's me in me (sic) hiking gear. I get the mike and I said, "Herr Blatter, have you ever taken a bribe?" Talk about crashing the party... Reporters are moving away from me as if I've just let out the biggest smell since bad food. Well, that's what I wanted. Thank you, idiot reporters (Miller, 2015).

It is worth noting that Jennings' role in forcing Blatter to resign has been acknowledged and applauded by commentators within the British press (Jenkins, 2015; Reade, 2015), and his earlier investigative work has received praise from the academy (Boyle, Rowe and Whannel, 2010: 249). The "idiocy" that he refers to above would seem to be an ethical judgement related to the perceived steps that journalists take in order not to upset sources, and the desire for sports journalists to preserve their contacts is a recurring theme in the literature (Andrews, 2014; Boyle, 2006a; Bradshaw and Minogue, 2020; Humphries, 2003). Across all spheres of journalism, the relationship between journalist and source is regarded as being difficult: "A journalist's work involves a constant tension between nurturing trust and maintaining scepticism. This is nowhere clearer than in the relationship between reporters and sources" (Sanders, 2003: 107). In the field of sports journalism specifically, Humphries suggests that an enduring positive relationship between a sports journalist and those they cover is, if not unachievable, then at least highly unlikely.

Our relationships with sportspeople mirror the arc of their own careers. Progress. Apex. Decline. With us it's build-up, in close and then bam, the punch comes. The criticism from the source they least expect, at the time they least expect it, just when they begin to wane. We're the first off the bandwagon. That's our nature. The scorpion always stings (Humphries, 2003: 367-368).

This sentiment is echoed by another sports journalist in an autobiographical work. A "communal cynicism" is widespread in press boxes, says Simon Hughes, "where Tall Poppy Syndrome (build 'em up, knock 'em down) is rife" (Hughes, 2006: 55). Hughes and Humphries,

both award-winning sportswriters (although the latter had a spectacular fall from grace due to criminal behaviour unrelated to journalism), acknowledge the contortions that sports journalists get into in order to maintain contacts, but also ponder too the times when they should “sting” rather than schmooze; or, as it is phrased in the title of one academic paper, when a contact should be “thrown under the bus” (Sefiha, 2010). A little later in his book, Humphries adds:

In the Toy Department, we are all... short-term impact. Special effects. We die to create the illusion of insider access when being outside could be our salvation (Humphries, 2003: 372).

The final sentence arguably captures the kind of approach that Jennings would laud; an approach that eschews superficial coverage of who finished where in sports events, of exclusive player interviews, and similar, and instead focuses on the deeper analysis that only a more detached “outsider” status can provide. 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).

The journalist who interviewed Jennings for the *Washington Post* emphasises how Jennings was more concerned with what was happening away from the pitch than on it: “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 will be elaborated upon and employed in this thesis as a key concept. 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’ writings 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'. *Prima facie*, this is a question that is central to the intersection of questions around a sports journalist's identity and a sports journalist's ethics, and 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 (mal)-administration, for example)? Jennings clearly holds literal ball-watchers in a state of contempt, but that is arguably unfair and simplistic, given the appetite for information about superficial activities that exists among sports fans (Steen, 2014). However, a press corps that becomes too consumed by the treadmill of literal ball-watching runs the risk of becoming one-dimensional, as the following quote from Paul Hetherington, the former executive secretary of the Football Writers' Association and football editor of the *Daily Star Sunday*, suggests (somewhat ironically, this comment from Hetherington was made in response to Jennings' criticisms of sports journalists in the 2010 *Press Gazette* interview):

Football writers are a very hard working group of journalists. There are football matches on Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday night – they are previewing matches, writing match reports and doing follow-ups, as well as big interviews. They are often working from early in the morning until midnight. For that reason, newspapers often hand over major investigations to the investigations department, rather than asking a football writer to go off diary for a few months to investigate allegations of corruption (Ponsford, 2010).

Hetherington's comments arguably function as an unintentional vindication of the importance of the concept of ball-watching. Hetherington appears to be operating from within a paradigm of literal ball-watching, a paradigm that seems to allow him to quite happily pass the work of 'hard' sports news reporting onto others and to regard it as belonging to a different sphere. Rather than serving as mitigation to Jennings' claims, Hetherington's quote suggests that a heavy diet of literal ball-watching can result in an almost wilful decision to not pursue the deeper issues.



### 3.5 Issues of Sports Journalism Ethics in the Digital Era

#### 3.5.1 *Sky Sports News – An Insight*

Cairns (2018) offers a frank, vivid and thoughtful assessment of the ethical issues facing sports journalism in the digital era by someone at the sharp end of the debate. As executive editor of Sky Sports News at the time, Cairns was overseeing a team of around 200 sports journalists producing sports news across Sky's TV and online platforms. This literature review will give some substantial attention to points made by him, as they serve to frame a number of key issues in need of further exploration.

In Cairns' view, the Leveson Inquiry's report (Leveson, 2012) precipitated a closer scrutiny of media ethics generally, not just of news journalism ethics (Cairns, 2018). Against this backdrop, the growth of digital platforms means sports journalists have been having to produce output faster than ever before: "The pace of news now means journalists are making decisions about what they write, publish and broadcast faster than they've ever done before" (Cairns, 2018:7). Moreover, staff cutbacks at many employers means that moral agency is arguably being felt more keenly by modern sports journalists in the digital environment: "As many newsrooms run with fewer staff it's very often an inexperienced journalist who will have to make that on-the-spot instant decision on their own" (Cairns, 2018: 8). He adds: "Rolling news puts huge pressures on journalists and means we rarely have time to stand back and look at the bigger picture" (Cairns, 2018: 11).

Attempts to control the flow of information are now part of the sport media ecosystem, with clubs, governing bodies and players' agents all seeking to emphasise some angles and halt the use of other content. This, argues Cairns, has made it harder for people inside sport to speak out, and concomitantly has given rise to the increased use of anonymous sources. The quest for eyeballs on a story can also trump the pursuit of truth, with established outlets facing "increasing competition from media organisations with a more cavalier attitude to the truth and to fact-checking, for whom the number of clicks is more important" (Cairns, 2018: 10). In addition, the arrival of non-traditional online outlets has given rise to new ethical challenges that have undermined once-sacrosanct journalistic principles, such as the need to have two

independent sources corroborating a claim before it is released into the public domain. Cairns is worth quoting at length on this point, as his writing encapsulates questions about the ethics and professional self-identity that arise in tandem from the workings of the new digital media ecosystem:

We know where we stand with traditional rivals. But there's a disturbing ground occupied by news and gossip sites, sometimes with significant Twitter followings, where different rules apply. They will run stories without checking, will present opinion as fact and run stories that are just wrong. They're popular and they present a problem for traditional news organisations in the battle for viewers and readers. We've had to respond. Most news organisations followed the two sources rule for any story. With the pace of news and increased competition that's not workable now, especially as the second source may be trying to break the news themselves on their own website or Twitter feed. So we have a series of checks. Each story is different but our first consideration for story sources who don't want to be named is to challenge whether they are in a position to know for certain. We also consider our relationship with them and how reliable and trustworthy a contact they are. Then we consider why they are telling us. Any doubt and we keep checking and checking. There's no science to this and we have a fantastic contact base and good systems for quickly standing up and, just as importantly, knocking down stories (Cairns, 2018: 10).

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

The challenge comes when a rumour gathers significant momentum on social media. We can't ignore it so we tell our viewers that this is a rumour we know is gaining traction, that we are checking to verify and that we will update as soon as we can. It's not where we were a few years ago, where we waited to confirm a story before putting it to air, but it's honest with our audience (Cairns, 2018, 10-11).

Cairns, perhaps inevitably given his role in charge of one of the biggest sports news outlets in the UK, offers a competing view to Jennings, contending that sports journalists are now far more investigative-minded than previously. There are, he suggests, plenty of reasons to believe that the quality of sports journalism is good. However, he argues that this bolder and wider-ranging stance taken by sports journalists raises issues around ethical training:

Sports journalists now regularly cover issues that shine a light on some of the key ethical questions in broader society. Over the last year sports writers have covered the take a knee debate, stories about race and sex discrimination, corruption, gambling, drugs, abuse and mental health. The industry needs journalists equipped to handle these question (Cairns, 2018: 11-12).

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

In the course of his overview of ethical issues facing the sports media, Cairns refers to the Leveson Inquiry, which was precipitated by phone hacking by the UK press (Leveson, 2012). While the Leveson Inquiry and the connected Metropolitan Police investigation into phone hacking, Operation Weeting, focused primarily on news desk operations, it is relevant to note here that one sports journalist was arrested as part of Weeting. Raoul Simons, deputy football editor at *The Times*, which he joined from the *London Evening Standard* in 2009, was arrested in September 2011 but cleared by the Crown Prosecution Service in July 2012 (Halliday, 2012). No in-depth study into potential criminality by UK media sports departments has been carried out and such a wide-ranging investigation is beyond the scope of this project. However, the issue forms an important backdrop that informs this study.

### *3.5.2 Social Media and Clickbait*

The use of Twitter and other social media platforms is now an established form of sports journalism practice (English, 2016; Lambert, 2018b; Sherwood and Nicholson, 2012), although research is ambivalent about how effectively sports journalists deploy new media technologies (Fondevila-Gascon, Rom-Rodriguez and Santana-Lopez, 2016). It has also acted as a spur to competition between sports journalists (Gibbs and Haynes, 2013), while its use as a news source has meant that the news market has become more fragmented and people's consumption "atomised" (Harding, 2017).

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

churn out unsatisfying yet tasty morsels of clickbait for the audience to gorge themselves on” (Cable and Mottershead, 2018: 78).

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

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

### **3.6 Objectivity, Impartiality, Detachment – and Post-Truth Fake News**

#### *3.6.1 Objectivity and the “Microwave Generation”*

Objectivity, impartiality and detachment are related concepts, although their precise meaning and the nature of their overlap within journalism studies is contested (Bell, 1998; Kieran, 1998; Sambrook, 2012; Schudson, 2001; Ward, 2010). They are regarded as “traditional” journalistic values (Preston, 2009), although it has been argued that the conception of them as somehow foundational to journalistic practice is one that overlooks

how they arose in specific historical contexts (Schudson, 2001). For Sambrook, impartiality is defined as “the removal of bias” while objectivity is defined as “a disciplined approach to isolate evidence and facts” (Sambrook, 2012: 5). Impartiality has been explored in some depth, at least from a current affairs and news perspective, by Marsh who defines it as a process rather than an outcome (Marsh, 2012). It is not something that is achieved in a single moment, rather something that is obtained over time in order to ensure that “all the significant voices along all the significant axes are heard – but weighted to reflect their overall significance to the debate” (Marsh, 2012: 77).

Schudson has characterised traditional Western news media as operating to an “objectivity norm” of “procedural fairness” (Schudson, 2001), a norm which he says has not always characterised the media and which he identifies as having arisen in the United States in the 1920s:

The objectivity norm guides journalists to separate facts from values and to report only the fact. Objective reporting is supposed to be cool, rather than emotional, in tone.... According to the objectivity norm, the journalist’s job consists of reporting something called ‘news’ without commenting on it, slanting it, or shaping its formulation in any way (Schudson, 2001: 150).

A formalised and codified commitment to objectivity was a means of defining the industry, he argues, in that “objectivity seemed a natural and progressive ideology for an aspiring occupational group at a moment when science was god, efficiency was cherished, and increasingly prominent elites judged partisanship a vestige of the tribal 19<sup>th</sup> century” (Schudson, 2001: 162). While Schudson’s general idea is frequently cited, less discussed is his contention that the majority of sports reporters are exempt from the ideal and rules of objectivity because of the “ethnocentric” approach of most American media to sport: “In the rare cases where an American news organization is designed with a national audience in mind – *USA Today* – sports reporting operates by an objectivity norm, but ordinarily sports reporters openly favor local teams” (Schudson, 2001: 164). Such “boosterism” means local teams in the US are “examined from a stance that presumes enthusiastic backing of the team” (ibid.). Turning the lens onto the other side of the Atlantic, it would seem that the emergence

of sports journalism in Victorian Britain was not rooted in a culture of objectivity. As one historian has noted, dispassionate observation was rare by reporters due to them often being involved in the sports themselves as secretaries, club administrators and players (Huggins, 2004: 151). There should, therefore, be wariness when seeking to apply talk of an objectivity norm across countries and news cultures.

Questions around objectivity and impartiality have been sharpened by the emergence of a 'post-truth' culture in which misrepresentation, half-truths and brazen lies are disseminated for a variety of reasons, some ideological, some for financial gain, and some merely for the purpose of generating a laugh among fellow internet users (Ball, 2017). In a 2012 article, Sambrook provided an early exploration of ideas relating to post-truth in the digital age, and posed the question of whether an emphasis on impartiality in news was an "impediment to a free market in ideas" (Sambrook, 2012: 3). Widening the question, he asked:

Do we need different codes or journalistic norms for the digital age? Or, in a world where a torrent of information and misinformation make it harder than ever to know what is real, are impartiality and objectivity *more* important than ever to establish what is true and raise the quality of public debate? (ibid.).

The calls for a rethink regarding the adherence to objectivity and impartiality as traditionally conceived have at times come from some perhaps unexpected quarters. In 2010, the then director-general of the BBC, Mark Thompson, stated that rules around television news impartiality were outmoded and called for audiences to be exposed to "a range of opinionated journalism" which they could then make their own judgements about (Sherwin, 2010). However, a contrary position is that impartiality is required more than ever to differentiate serious-minded, reliable journalism from the "noise" that circulates on the web (Marsh, 2012). Others have sought to redefine impartiality with a view to ensuring that multiple views are heard rather than those of the centre. The position of Radical Impartiality has been propounded by Horrocks:

impartiality" – the need to hear the widest range of views – all sides of the story. So

This perspective is developed by Sambrook. Diversity of opinion is one of three principles (Evidence, Diversity and Transparency) that he contends are vital for the essence of objectivity and impartiality to be retained for a digital age. A platform for a diverse range of opinions, he argues, provides "oxygen to rational debate" and mitigates homophily, "the tendency to shelter in opinion that's familiar" (Sambrook 2012, 40). Indeed, ensuring that each internet/social media user is exposed to a diversity of opinion and narratives, rather than being cocooned in their own homophilic "filter bubble" which reinforces their own beliefs, is widely regarded as one of the key issues of the social media-driven post-truth era: "The ubiquity of social media and the way its business model works, targeting us with more of what we like, is an open invitation to stay in our lane – in our interests, our geographies, our views, our media and our lives" (Bell, 2017).

One position is that transparency has superseded objectivity; that "transparency is the new objectivity" (Weinberger, 2009). Sambrook summarises this position well:

As objectivity was once designed to engender trust in news, now transparency is the means to achieve that – openness about sources, means, and interests. In particular it's held that knowing the personal views of the reporter helps the reader to discern bias and take account of it (Sambrook, 2012: 11).

Objectivity may arguably be a traditional cornerstone of journalism ethics, but the growth of digital technology has stimulated a growth in more subjective output, in which the expression of opinion by sports journalists is not only permitted by audiences but is expected. In a mixed-methods study combining content analysis of tweets and interviews with sports writers, it was concluded that the emergence of social media has affected sports journalists' match-day



working routines so that the incorporation of opinion has become more central to their output – “opinion is part of the online job” (Roberts and Emmons, 2016: 111). In Roberts and Emmons’ study, speed of delivery and entertainment were identified by one sports journalist as what a digital-age audience wants:

I’ll send out some fun tweets just to lighten the mood... This is the microwave generation – you get everything immediately. Everyone wants to know now. Some want to be entertained, but some want to be informed (Roberts and Emmons, 2016: 108).

As such, while questions of the enduring relevance or redefinition of objectivity and impartiality circulate more broadly in journalism studies, sports journalism has its own role to play in the debate. This role focuses in part on the extent of the legitimate occurrence of opinion and entertainment in sports media content (what might be broadly termed subjective content), and also on whether the speed at which content is delivered undermines its capacity to satisfy traditional values.

### *3.6.2 Fake News*

In an analysis of the emergence of a post-truth milieu, one journalist and media commentator has defined fake news as false content that falls into the bracket of being “easily shareable and discussable stories, posted to social media for jokes, for ideology, for political reasons by groups connected to foreign nations, such as Russia, or – most commonly – to make a bit of money” (Ball, 2017: 1). While false news is nothing new – misinformation has often been purveyed by the media – fake news is distinct from false news in the speed at which it is disseminated (Rajan, 2018). However, the term ‘fake news’, despite being widely used, is far from being used univocally, prompting the claim that “Fake news has become a meaningless and rather dangerous phrase” (Bell, 2017). However, while ‘fake news’ is now a pejorative term, a case has been made for the activity of fake news production being a healthy one for audiences.

The use of the term 'fake news', according to Baym, derives from its use on an American hybrid news-comedy show, *The Daily Show*, in the mid/late 2000s – a programme “unburdened by objectivity, journalistic integrity or even accuracy” (Comedy Central 2007, quoted in Baym, 2010: 374). But, he argues, implicit in the now-widespread use of the term 'fake news' is the idea that its antithesis – 'real news' – can be defined. Baym provides a tentative definition of 'real' news as “an *authentic* or *legitimate* kind of news: a journalism of objectivity and accuracy, public service and professional integrity” (Baym, 2010: 375). He then argues that this idea is bogus. Baym offers a thesis that is arguably counter-intuitive. His premise, he says, is that fake news:

is not fake because it *misrepresents* its subject matter or somehow exists at a greater distance to *the actual* than do other forms of news. Rather, fake news is 'fake' to the extent that it rejects the conventional practices widely accepted as defining 'the news'. For that reason, fake news may be better understood not as fake, but rather as a quite real and much-needed effort to reinvent public-interest journalism (Baym, 2010: 376).

Fake news, then, actually represents a way of broadening public discourse about the issues that matter, among people who otherwise might not engage with those issues at all. Traditional 'real news' practices, he contends, lead to mainstream journalism having a symbiotic relationship with those who they are reporting on, resulting in the mainstream media being in danger of failing to hold the powerful to account and instead being used by the powerful as an instrument to influence public opinion. Fake news, by contrast, is not constrained by the traditional, symbiotic relationships of reporter to source, and as such maintains a “critical distance” that is superior to that provided by the mainstream media (Baym, 2010: 378). Baym also contends that fake news eschews the mainstream media's obsession with soundbites, and instead makes a deliberate effort to cover and discuss other contextual, or conflicting, content. It is also unafraid to give a platform to a wider variety of voices and viewpoints than those provided in the mainstream media. Fake news “represents the harnessing of the power of entertainment in pursuit of an older set of journalistic ideals” (Baym, 2010: 382).

While highlighting some of the inadequacies of mainstream reporting, Baym's position – published well before 2016, when post-truth and fake news became prominent terms due to the EU referendum and US presidential election (Ball, 2017) – is now unsustainable. Fake news is no longer a term that can plausibly be used to refer to a publically-enriching counter-mainstream source of media content; instead, it is used to capture the extent to which media discourse has been contaminated by deliberate falsehood which is spread virally through the new digital ecosystem, often with ulterior motives. However, as with Schudson's rejection of ahistorical attempts to understand objectivity discussed above, Baym reinforces the sense of the slipperiness and complexity contained within the concept of traditional journalistic objectivity.

### *3.6.3 Post-Truth, Freedom of Expression and Sports Journalism*

According to a number of media academics and commentators, one symptom of the post-truth era is the emergence of virality – the stimulation of online reaction – as the principal currency of online information, rather than truth (Hermida, 2016; Smith, 2016; Viner, 2016). In such a context, the question has been posed as to whether traditional liberal arguments for freedom of expression (Mill, 1859/1973, Milton 1644/1989) are still coherent or relevant (Bradshaw, 2017). Underpinning many of the debates about contemporary media ethics is the issue of how the fake news of the post-truth era should be contained (Jarvis, 2016a and 2016b; Smith, 2016; Viner, 2016). Connected to the issue of virality of content is volume of content. Relatedly, a distinguished triumvirate of sports media researchers have posed the question of whether the plenitude of sports content in the digital age has arguably led to more superficial coverage rather than deeper analysis: “Is the sheer volume of sports journalism content saturating cultural space and impeding critical reflection?” (Boyle, Rowe and Whannel, 2010; 247). The issue is not merely theoretical for the sports media with there being confirmed instances of fake sports news being published by mainstream outlets (Corcoran, 2014) and complacent churnalism occurring among sports journalists (Biasotti, 2015). These issues could be considered from the perspective of freedom of expression and its potential limits. Indeed, a philosophical analysis of freedom of expression that synthesises the ethical issues facing sports journalism would be valuable, but is beyond the scope of this thesis due to space constraints.

While the dissemination of inaccurate or deliberately false media content is not a phenomenon unique to the digital age, the modern media ecosystem amplifies the risks arising from it due to the speed at which the bogus content is spread. Harding puts it vividly: “The deliberate manufacturing of news stories to amuse or mislead is nothing new. But the speed and make up of social media means that nowadays the lie gets half way around the world before anyone can think to challenge it” (2017: 18). One journalist has invoked a catch-all term to encompass “misrepresentation, half-truths and outrageous lies alike”: *bullshit* (Ball, 2017). To combat this rising tide of bullshit, Ball suggests that earnest fact-checking and other norms of honest, accurate traditional journalism are inadequate: “When it comes to dealing with the bullshitters, the mainstream media may be bringing a knife to a gun fight” (2017: 7). Bell has suggested that regulation may be needed to counter the spread of misinformation: “The problem is... that the speed of the emerging landscape for media has been so quick... so free of regulation in nearly all aspects, that rather like financial deregulation before it, we haven’t been able to really grasp the problem until it is almost too late” (Bell, 2017).

Factors affecting the flow of sports media information is considered from another perspective by Lambert (2018a). Through case studies looking at two sports journalists whose accounts were taken down by social media companies, Lambert argues that freedom of speech has been undermined by a current focus on tech companies’ duty to protect users. In his analysis of the cases of cricket journalist Nishant Joshi and investigative sports reporter Andrew Jennings, Lambert argues that tech companies appear not to have made any attempt to investigate the legitimacy of complaints made against the sports journalists, instead taking down the accounts following mere accusations. This poses additional concerns about how the digital age has affected the free flow of information about sport, and underscores the relevance of a philosophical analysis of freedom of expression that incorporates the ethical issues facing sports journalism.

### 3.6.4 Objectivity – A Desirable Norm?

Perhaps the antidote to the bullshit is a return to the traditional: to objectivity. However, objectivity is not, it has been argued, a trans-historical concept when it comes to understanding journalism. This is a point that has already been considered in the discussion of Schudson (2001) above. Elsewhere, Shoemaker and Reese have argued that “the routine of objectivity” can be seen as fulfilling a “defensive function” for media organisations:

Objectivity, although a cornerstone of journalistic ideology, is rooted in practical organizational requirements. In this sense, objectivity is less a core belief of journalists than a set of procedures to which journalists willingly conform in order to protect themselves from attack (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996: 112).

The “objectivity norm”, they argue, helps media organisations “maximize their audience appeal” by meeting the public’s – or the audience’s – standards and expectations (1996: 113). This is an elaboration – or restatement – of Tuchman’s concept of objectivity as a “strategic ritual”: a series of procedures that reporters go through – such as getting multiple viewpoints, putting statements from sources in quotation marks – in order to protect themselves from criticism, both from editors and the public, even if those procedures do not necessarily capture the truth (Tuchman, 1977; Blaagaard, 2013). Arguably, inherent in the idea of strategic ritual is the concept of an unwitting deception whereby the truth is potentially muffled out of an adherence to a professional norm that serves firstly to protect the practitioner.

Steen suggests that objectivity and detachment are neither achievable nor necessarily desirable for sports journalism, arguing that: “For all the impartiality it requires, this (sports writing) is no more a job you can do dispassionately than you can do blindfold... there is no newspaper or magazine editor I know who would hire anyone for such a position who did not have the wherewithal to be one-eyed” (Steen, 2014: 10). A rejoinder to this could be that it is as equally plausible that no newspaper or magazine editor would hire anyone who did not have the wherewithal to be detached when required. Steen adds that “every piece of writing, every piece of journalism, is slanted or shaded in some way and hence opinionated” (Steen,

2014: 17), an argument which rests, firstly, on the questionable assumption that every article is indeed slanted or shaded, and, secondly, that slant and shade equates to the expression of opinion. While Steen's contention is not deeply argued, it is important to note that it represents the viewpoint that sports journalism is not necessarily one where dispassionate objectivity is a prized virtue.

### **3.7 Self-Censorship**

#### *3.7.1 Self-Censorship, Censorship and Sports Journalism*

If objectivity – or at least the impression of it – is important for journalists because it helps cultivate a sense of trust from the audience, then that same trust also presupposes that what journalists are publishing is the whole truth, or at least the journalist's best attempt at it. Audience trust therefore assumes that censorship and self-censorship are not occurring.

However, the growth of digital media has also arguably made issues of self-censorship more prominent for sports journalists due to the ease with which social media and other digital platforms enable readers to react directly and immediately to content they dislike or disagree with (Binns, 2017a & 2017b; Bradshaw and Minogue, 2019; Steen, 2014: 151-160). The vehement expression of disagreement – sometimes in abusive terms – can make journalists less likely to voice certain honestly held opinions or even less likely to pursue certain stories (Binns, 2017a). However, a review of the literature, when combined with the previous chapter's case study, suggests that self-censorship within the sports media remains inadequately examined. Self-censorship is an issue that is implicit in a number of writings about sports journalism, both academic and professional, but explicit reference to it is lacking (Boyle, 2006a, 2006b; English, 2014; MacKenzie, 2016; Sefiha, 2010; Walsh, 2013). For example, Sefiha (2010), in the qualitative investigation into the American cycling magazine *Bikesport* discussed in the previous chapter, considers when journalists exercise "discretion" over the publishing of content for fear of upsetting contacts, while Boyle (2006b) considers the "soft consensus" that can emerge between journalists over how a story is to be approached, the implication being that the press pack can steer clear of the trickier 'hard' news and questions. While there is an admission of self-censorship by some practising sports journalists (Steen 2014), a distinction between the self-censoring of opinion and of fact is

lacking, as is a detailed exploration of the reasons for self-censorship in sports journalism, such as Sturges (2008) has provided for news content more generally. Research into this key ethical concept as it applies to sports journalism is required, and one of the aims of this project is to explore the extent and implications of self-censorship in sports journalism (RO1).

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 to this research project, 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).

As *The Times* editorial illustrates, self-censorship was clearly a concern for leader writers in the 19<sup>th</sup> 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. If *The Times* article does not provide a clear use of the term, then it is also the case that more recent discussions of self-censorship have not always provided clear definitions of it either. Self-censorship is defined by Sedler 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). While a useful starting point, this is too narrow a definition, certainly now in the social media age. It is not just "speaking" that individuals refrain from, but publishing social media updates, while media organisations might refrain from broadcasting as well as "publishing". Writing from a US perspective, Sedler 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.

An important consideration in examining self-censorship is appreciating its varied forms. Self-censorship is not limited to decisions not to write or publish certain information; it is also manifest in decisions not to pursue certain stories, so that those stories never appear on a news organisation's running order or news list. A form of self-censorship also occurs when a 'hard' story is 'softened' or diluted. These two forms of self-censorship are discussed by Kohut (2000) whose survey of almost 300 journalists in the United States found "how commonplace and insidious" self-censorship is:

About a quarter of those polled have personally avoided pursuing newsworthy stories... Journalists are more likely to confirm that self-censorship exists generally than to personally admit to avoiding newsworthy stories. Still, the 26 percent who acknowledge personal self-censorship goes to 41 percent when reshaping and softening is included (Kohut, 2000: 42).

This research touches on an important aspect of data around self-censorship: the difficulties of diagnosing instances of it. Kohut's research suggests that journalists tend to regard self-



editorial phenomenon that exists generally, but not something that a journalist is likely to admit to personally. An important consideration, then, is understanding how to detect and verify instances of self-censorship. Relevant here is Steel's monograph considering journalism and freedom of expression (2012), in which he refers to forms of "opaque" censorship. Censorship should not just be associated with totalitarian or repressive regimes, he writes, but can be something more subtle and invisible: "It exists, dynamic, fluid, sometimes opaque yet powerful nevertheless" (2012: 4). While Steel is referring to censorship generally rather than self-censorship in particular, he captures something of the nature of self-censorship's imperceptibility and complexity; of its potential for far-reaching influence, despite it being by definition (due to it being a process initiated by a 'self') something that originates out of public view.

In a contemporary textbook on media ethics, self-censorship receives a rare explicit mention and, like *The Times* leader, is equated with a breach of a foundational principle of journalism: "If the journalist decided not to publish, then the act of self-censorship seems in conflict with the fundamental role of reporting the truth" (Sanford Horner, 2015: 94). However, while questions of self-censorship lurk in a number of writings about sports journalism the phenomenon is rarely named. Andrews contends that "sports journalists should always take care not to offend the sensibilities of others" (Andrews, 2014: 85) but gives no argument as to why sports journalists should tread so careful a line, while Boyle touches on it as well: "Too many journalists and former sports people abdicate their responsibility to report honestly because they may upset important people or damage their own career trajectory" (Boyle, 2006b). Similarly, in an analysis of whether former retired athletes make good sports journalists, a former BBC Sport editor suggests that the introduction of ex-professionals into the media is actually fostering a culture of self-censorship, with former players talking in platitudes for fear of upsetting clubs with whom they have had a professional connection (Bose, 2012). Complicity and a collusive dynamic between sports reporters and the people/organisations they report on are other ways in which self-censorship is alluded to without being made explicit (Sugden and Tomlinson, 2007; Vimieiro, 2017). Steen, meanwhile, who is a cricket writer as well as a sports media academic, appears to admit to self-censoring when writing about Sachin Tendulkar and India on the cricket website cricinfo, which has a large Indian audience:

Contemplating even the mildest criticism requires much soul-searching... any semblance of criticism will almost invariably attract a torrent of personal abuse. For the columnist, the benefits of this are twofold: (1) the need to get your facts straight is greater than it ever was when writing solely for the print or even the British media; and (2) the need to choose your views carefully, and also the way you express them, is more pressing than ever. In other words, when you are composing a column in the electronic age, there is an obligation to be a more responsible and thoughtful journalist. This cannot be a bad thing (Steen, 2014: 159-160).

The idea of “choosing your views carefully” is a curious one for a columnist in this context. If a view is dropped and therefore unpublished in light of the audience’s anticipated adverse reaction, then this would seem to be obvious case of self-censorship. This poses a question about the frequency of opinion-self-censorship among sports journalists. However, as Binns has argued following primarily quantitative research into journalists’ online interactions with their readers, “In the last 15 years, being insulted and harassed online has simply become part of the job for most journalists” (Binns, 2017b). Journalists, including news, feature and sports journalists, self-censor in light of the new interactive digital framework which enables audiences to insult, criticise and abuse (Binns, 2017a).

The issue of self-censorship is also raised, with varying degrees of directness, in books by sports journalists which recount those journalists’ experiences working in the industry (Hughes, 2006; Humphries 2003; Walsh 2012, 2013). Hughes considers a long tradition of touring cricket reporters keeping quiet about a range of off-field misdemeanours: “The travelling cricket reporters knew everything but said (and wrote) nothing” (Hughes, 2006: 30). The title of Humphries’ a-year-in-the-life account, *Laptop Dancing and the Nanny Goat Mambo*, even contains within it an allusion to the practice of sports journalists skirting around the difficult issues and difficult questions – Humphries refers to this collective contortion by journalists as the “nanny goat mambo” (Humphries, 2003). Humphries touches on self-censorship elsewhere. To get “all close and pally with a player is fine,” he writes, “but the next time he has a howler and you cover for him, you should have a little disclosure at the end of your report: ‘The Journalist Drinks With Several Members of the Beaten Team. Copy Content

Has Been Written With A View To Continuing This Arrangement” (Humphries, 2003: 184). The points made colloquially by Hughes and Humphries are made in the academic literature too, with Hardin, Zhong and Whiteside writing that “reporters may shy away from writing critical stories in fear of losing access to the athletes” (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 21<sup>st</sup> century; reporters knew of the abuse but did not cover it – a *prima facie* example of complicity through self-censorship.

Allegations of sports journalists self-censoring to the detriment of truth have been made from within the industry as well as from without, even if the term has not been used directly. The now disgraced former national tabloid editor Kelvin MacKenzie alleged in a *Sun* column that “the real bad boys” during Sam Allardyce’s removal as England manager in 2016 following a *Telegraph* expose of questionable behaviour that compromised the coach’s position were sports journalists. Under the headline “Sports mafia that’s kept Big Sam’s secrets safe for years”, MacKenzie asserted that too many sports journalists put the enhancement of their own careers ahead of telling the truth and exposing corruption:

They (sports journalists) have been hearing this type of stuff for years and yet have never written a word about it for fear that it will ruin their cosy relationship with players, managers and owners. Can I explain something to them. They are not PRs for the clubs. They are supposed to be disclosing to readers, viewers and listeners what is really going on in football. Better to be banned from the ground than to not do your well-paid job properly. Instead writers (and I have one particular example in mind) spend their entire time hanging around radio studios giving their views about Allardyce and Co but not once disclosing important questionable information they have picked up on the grapevine. Perhaps they are more interested in the books they ghostwrite and the size of their Twitter following than blowing the whistle (MacKenzie, 2016).

A form of censorship also arguably exists in the power dynamic between sports reporters and the communications managers who run the media departments at elite sports clubs, with some research indicating that reporters feel they are effectively being censored by sports

clubs' communications departments. An example of this is contained in research into the Bundesliga, the top division of German football, with a title that is explicit regarding the paper's conclusions: 'Pressure On Printed Press – How soccer clubs determine journalism in the German Bundesliga'. Interviews with the heads of media at 18 Bundesliga sides and an online survey with 174 print sports journalists covering those clubs 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, 2017). Epistemological and ethical questions arise for sports journalism when official sources become widely regarded as purveyors of partial truths or untruths.

Applying and updating Shoemaker and Reese's theoretical perspective of the Hierarchy of Influences, which emphasises the media's routine reliance on external sources when shaping the news (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996), Kozman considers sports media content as the output of the interplay between journalists and sources in constructing the news (Kozman, 2017). While her study focuses on the coverage of steroid abuse in baseball, Kozman's approach can be considered as applying to sports coverage more generally. She writes:

The Hierarchy of Influences conceives of media routines as the media's adaptation to the constraints sources impose on them. To produce content, the media depend on external sources found typically in news beats. As central actors in news reporting, sources can control what becomes news. With the ability to influence reporters' understanding of an issue, sources may also influence the public's perceptions and judgments. News, thus, is the outcome of the interaction between journalists and their sources, as the former rely on authoritative persons in their newsbeats to provide them with official information they can turn into news (Kozman, 2017: 49)

This complex interaction can perhaps be usefully considered through the prism of self-censorship, not least because Kozman notes soon after that "the extensive time reporters spend with teams either at the beat or on the road changes the relationship in a way that

makes sports reporters identify with their sources” (Kozman, 2017: 49). Such identification would, *prima facie*, make it more likely for journalists to muffle criticism of them.

“Selectivity” is another 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 puts it: “Inevitably journalists can become friends with their elite sources and that can subtly ‘soften’ coverage and cement loyalties” (2009: 108).

The collusion of sports journalists and the teams, coaches and players they cover is arguably analogous with the relationship that political reporters have with politicians. This point can be illustrated by substituting the phrase “professional sports clubs” for “politicians” in the following passage:

Journalists and politicians may sometimes pursue different goals but this occurs within an agreed framework which offer potential benefits to both groups. Each group requires the other, no matter how reluctantly, to prosecute its own interests and purposes. Mutuality of interests drives and sustains the relationship (Franklin, 2004: 18)

Press access – part of the “agreed framework” – is a double-edged sword. This has been recognised in political reporting, but arguably applies in sports journalism too. Baym writes of “the wider press/politics axis, the dominant system of mutual dependence between journalists and public officials in which journalists are simultaneously enabled and constrained by their access to the corridors of power” (Baym, 2010: 378). This concept of being concurrently *enabled and constrained* is useful. For Baym it can be a constraint because “dependence on access too easily can become an over-eagerness to report on the scripts of power... and an equal refusal to engage in the kind of critical inquiry that the ideals of the Fourth Estate would require” (Baym, 2010: 378). There is a plausibility to the idea that

delivering the narratives of those in power is a phenomenon that is partly enabled by self-censorship, either witting or unwitting.

Self-censorship is linked to wider issues of free expression, but Keeble argues that freedom of the press – when understood as referring to the freedom of the individual journalist to make choices – is over-stated, because “the freedom of the individual journalist (particularly of the young trainee) in any media operation is restricted by vested interests, routinised working practices and hierarchical, bureaucratic, organisational structures” (Keeble 2009: 3). This raises questions around moral agency on the sports desk, particularly in light of Cairns’s (2018) points above about fewer (and often younger) reporters now having to make ethical judgements and news value judgements in less time.

There is a significant corpus of evidence to suggest that self-censorship is prevalent among both the news media (Preston, 2009; Sefiha, 2010; Sturges, 2008; Binns, 2017a) and the public more generally (Dans, 2014; Das and Kramer, 2013; Hampton, Raine and Lu *et al*, 2014). With regard to the public this is, perhaps, in some ways counter-intuitive, because self-censorship would seem to be an activity at odds with the culture of ‘over-sharing’ that some believe is characteristic of digital-native social media users (Bromwich, 2016). However, self-censorship and over-sharing are arguably two sides of the same coin, both being techniques relating to the development by social media users of an online persona.

Sturges (2008) offers a quadripartite taxonomy of the reasons for self-censorship, the first of which – the fear of breaking the “constraints of conformity” – is concerned with going against the grain of majority opinion. Sturges regards self-censorship as “much more insidious” than censorship, contending that “if others suppress our freedom of expression it is bad, but if we allow ourselves to censor our own opinions it is worse” (Sturges, 2008: 256). It is also, he argues, potentially to the detriment of the public good. While Sturges considers self-censorship – or “indirect censorship” as he sometimes refers to it – in terms of its impact on politics and political/news journalism (“it amounts to people voluntarily doing what otherwise might be the work of police and security services” (Sturges, 2008: 257)), his taxonomy is a useful lens through which to consider the reasons for self-censorship in sports journalism.

Sturges's first category within his taxonomy is self-censorship through an obedience to the constraints of conformity, in which an individual allows "a perception of the levels of expression that society will tolerate to stifle their individual responses" (2008: 256) or in which they are fearful of "going against the grain of social expectation" (Sturges, 2008: 260). Second is the tailoring by journalists of content that they believe will adhere to the policies and politics of their employer; third is the withholding of publication through fear of legal sanction (a claim for defamation, for example); fourthly, there is the awareness of the potential application in some countries of prior restraint. Sturges considers the shared causes for each category of self-censorship and concludes that fear is a common characteristic. However, fear is a nuanced emotion, "covering a wide spectrum from outright terror to a mere delicateness about giving offence" (Sturges 2008, 258). Sturges' identification and discussion of fear as a key motive for self-censorship is useful, and he takes the analysis a step further by seeking to codify the ways in which people seek to justify self-censorship to themselves, contending that those justifications are: national security; preservation of social stability; protection of the national culture; and tolerance and respect for the beliefs and viewpoints of minorities. It is questionable, however, whether fear is a necessary or sufficient condition for self-censorship, and sports journalism is omitted from Sturges' analysis.

Sturges' taxonomy was developed when social media was in its infancy, and the growth of social media has prompted other facets of self-censorship to emerge. Dans (2014) argues that most instances of self-censorship by members of the public in the social media age are merely a form of self-defence that prevent the user's remarks being misconstrued. Reflecting on his own use of Twitter, he says that his behaviour on the platform was very different when he had 200 followers to when he had tens of thousands – and that the explanation for the difference is "simply one of survival" (2014). He contends that self-censorship is inherent in the way social media functions:

Anybody who has spent time sharing information on a social network understands the dynamic, and that self-censorship is alive and well: as one's perceived or real audience grows, the amount of information about ourselves that we are prepared to share diminishes. ... The fewer people I am talking to, and the better I know them, the less I

have to explain myself in detail, just to make sure there is no chance of any misunderstanding (ibid).

The autoethnographic nature of Dans's reflections on the nature of self-censorship on social media contrasts with the quantitative data gathered by Das and Kramer (2013). Through data provided by Facebook, and gathered from 3.9 million users over a 17-day period, their study attempts to capture the extent to which users of Facebook self-censor at the "last minute" (2013: 120). Their study defines self-censorship in this social media environment as the failure to post a status update that has been drafted. However, this is a questionable definition, as a user might opt not to post an update for a host of reasons other than self-censorship – such as lack of time, the realisation of multiple mistakes of grammar or spelling *etc.* However, in a similar way to Dans's notion of self-censorship being a means of digital "survival", Das and Kramer introduce the concept of how self-censorship on social media can preserve a user's "social capital" by not alienating their online friends, or at least a subset of them (2013).

Self-censorship on social media – a process which by definition inhibits the flow of content – sits awkwardly alongside the greater ease of communication inherent in web technologies. As Hampton, Raine and Lu *et al* (2014) discuss, the hope of some social media pioneers was that the proliferation of digital platforms would open the channels of communication so that those holding minority views would be willing to voice their opinions, in a way that they had not been prepared to do in the pre-internet era due to the 'spiral of silence' phenomenon (2014). The spiral of silence tendency refers to people's reluctance to publicly air their views on policy issues when they think their view is a minority opinion. However, research by the Pew Center in the United States has provided evidence that the internet has achieved no such thing. The research, which consisted of a survey of more than 1,800 adults, concluded that the growth of social media platforms had not reduced the spiral of silence tendency, and that people are less willing to discuss policy issues on social media than they are in person. Moreover, in both face-to-face and digital settings, people are more prepared to share their views if they believe their audience will be in agreement (ibid.).

While self-censorship on social media has been investigated in terms of the public's use of social platforms, research is needed on the nature of sports journalists' self-censorship on



social media. Furthermore, while the prevalence and reasons for self-censorship in the news media have been investigated in some depth, much less has been done to thoroughly investigate this issue from the viewpoint of sports journalism, although Binns (2017a) has touched on it. While the phenomenon of self-censorship appears to be implicit in many writings on sports journalism, it is rarely referred to as such. A more direct investigation of the phenomenon is required.

### *3.7.2 Maintaining or Breaking the 'Soft Consensus'? The Paradox of the Uniformity of Content*

Boyle (2006b) refers to the media career of Irish footballer-turned-journalist Eamon Dunphy, highlighting it as one that he believes contrasts with the platitudes and superficialities of many former professionals and star pundits. Dunphy “has always been clear that his role is to inform his readers and speak on their behalf, rather than simply to reproduce what he calls the ‘soft consensus’ that often exists among sports journalists” (Boyle, 2006b). Some research into sports journalism suggests this soft consensus is still very much in place. Based on research of six quality/broadsheet titles and their online output in the UK, Australia and India, English (2014) adopts a Bourdieu-inspired position that contends that a homogeneity characterises sports output, with competition between titles actually leading 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 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). The soft consensus, therefore, is arguably maintained by the digital ecosystem, and perhaps underpinned by the persistence of the “group mentality of the journalistic pack that travels and works closely with its key sources”, which Boyle invokes (2017: 493). This is arguably a manifestation of a form of group self-censorship, and is another illustration of the diverse forms that self-censorship can take in the sports media.

### 3.8 Codes of Conduct and Professional Identity

#### 3.8.1 Professional Identity – Profession, Trade or Craft?

As was highlighted in the early pages of this literature review, sports journalism has been perceived as a frivolous – or at least less serious – form of journalism than other forms of writing and reporting (Boyle, Rowe and Whannel, 2010; Humphries, 2003; Rowe 2005 and 2007), yet the investigative work of some sports journalists has also earned them praise for their diligence in helping to expose dubious practices, for example around doping (Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2018). It has been contended that the “toy department of the news media” moniker that sports journalism has received “reveals the extent to which the low professional status of sports journalism corresponds to an elite disdain for sport as corporeally-based popular culture among many intellectuals and arbiters of cultural taste” (Boyle, Rowe and Whannel, 2010: 246). Moreover, alterations to the media landscape occasioned by the digital revolution have posed questions around the professional identity of the sports journalist. The growth of digital technology has undermined traditional print-based business models, and “as the funding of journalism moves centre stage as a driver in shaping the new trajectories of journalism, those working in sports also have had to adapt and reinvent themselves” (Boyle, 2017: 494). One new addition to the sports media landscape, launched towards the end of this research project in the summer-autumn of 2019, poses questions about the extent or otherwise of reinvention. *The Athletic* (theathletic.co.uk) offers old-style football writing with a digital-age funding model. As an online-only, subscription-based football outlet, it gives well-paid sports writers the opportunity to write the longer-form style of article that was appearing to be squeezed out by shorter-form online content (Franklin-Wallis, 2020). *The Athletic’s* trajectory – growth or failure – could have significant implications for the nature of sports journalism in the UK in the years and decades ahead. However, while the viability or otherwise of *The Athletic’s* business and editorial model is open to debate, there is a widely shared view that ‘sports journalism’ is a term that encompasses a wide spectrum of both material and approaches. As Boyle puts it, “As in other areas of journalism, there are huge variations in the range, diversity and quality of the output that gets tagged as sports journalism” (2017: 493). Hutchins and Boyle argues that this contemporary sports journalism “community of practice” is under pressure due to a number

of overlapping changes, including alterations to working routines and technology (Hutchins and Boyle, 2017).

Considerable debate has been held, both within the industry and the academy, about whether journalism is a profession or trade (Belsey, 1998; Blaagaard, 2013; Cohen-Almagor, 2001; Marr 2004; Ornebring, 2010). It can be legitimately asked what difference it makes whether sports journalism is regarded as a profession or something else, particularly in the context of the “reinvention” noted by Boyle in the preceding paragraph. One response to this is that the status conferred by one’s occupation being regarded as a profession can potentially – perhaps both literally and metaphorically – open doors. Shoemaker and Reese contend that professional status – or at least the perception of it – can facilitate newsgathering and credibility: “Wearing the cloak of professionalism gives journalists more legitimacy with their sources and the audience” (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996: 94). However, the question can be asked in two ways. What difference does the status make to those whom journalists deal with if sports journalists are regarded as professionals, and what difference – if any – does it make to sports journalists if they regard themselves as professionals as opposed to, say, craftsmen? The issue therefore has both an *external* bearing and an *internal* bearing. With regards to the internal bearing, it has been argued that if a journalist regards their work as a trade rather than a profession, then it could skew their attitude to ethics and prompt them to countenance actions which they would otherwise regard as unethical (Cohen-Almagor, 2001).

Journalistic anxiety over the status of the journalist goes back more than half a century (Cameron, 1967). Ornebring considers journalists’ “ambivalence (or even antipathy)” towards the notion of their occupation being a profession, with them “preferring instead to call it a trade or craft”, and also discusses the idea of journalism inhabiting some middle ground – a semi-profession or a “not-quite-a-profession” (Ornebring, 2010: 568). Most centrally, however, Ornebring evaluates the extent to which changes to journalism have arguably led to a process of what he terms de-professionalisation. He defines professionalism as arguably satisfying three criteria: *knowledge* of a specialist field; *organisation* within the parameters of professional associations and a formal, occupation-specific code of ethics; and *autonomy* from external influence, with professional standards and punishments decided upon from within the profession (Ornebring, 2010: 569). The importance of the criterion of autonomy is

also emphasised by Shoemaker and Reese, who in addition also stress the perhaps now dated-seeming requirement that the occupation is *full-time* (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996: 92).

While his discussion focuses on journalism as a whole, Ornebring argues that the growth of specialisms in reporting – such as sports journalism and entertainment journalism – means that the first criterion, knowledge of a specific domain, is met: “Journalism now includes sub-specialisms in much the same way as medicine, law and engineering do, and these sub-specialisms increasingly demand specialized education” (Ornebring, 2010: 571). However, he also points out that for freelancers, who may work for a PR agency one day and a news organisation the next, the sense of professionalism is fading: “For those journalists without permanent employment, the distinctness of the occupation is eroding – if it was ever there to begin with” (Ornebring, 2010: 571). The rise of bloggers and citizen journalists can also be seen as a phenomenon of the digital age which undermines journalists’ claim to professionalism, because trained, specialised reporters are no longer the only individuals performing newsgathering and newswriting roles (Ornebring, 2010: 574). Moreover, the extent of journalists’ use – or what might be termed the over-reliance – of material provided by PR organisations is undermining the claim of journalistic professional autonomy. As Ornebring phrases it, there is a body of evidence that “source influence and source control are on the increase, and that journalistic autonomy, and, in turn, professionalism, are concomitantly decreasing” (Ornebring, 2010: 573).

While Ornebring seeks to diagnose journalists’ professional status by examining recent trends in the industry, others have stressed its historical dimension. Journalism has been described by Schudson, for example, as an “occupational culture with its own rules, its own rewards, and its own esprit”, a culture stemming from late 19<sup>th</sup> century reporting in the United States when formal interviews began to become a part of reporting practices (Schudson, 2001: 156). The importance of rejecting an ahistorical approach to understanding journalism and its practitioners’ identity is underscored by Deuze, who has noted how “the boundaries between journalism and other forms of public communication – ranging from public relations or advertorials to weblogs and podcast – are vanishing”, leading, he argues, to the steady erosion of the “distinct professional identity of newsrooms and their publications” (Deuze,

2007: 141). The rise of social media – and modes of digital communication more broadly – have also posed existential questions for sports journalists. The question has been stated as follows: “Are new media, user generated content and ‘citizen sports journalism’ contributing to the de-professionalization of sports journalism?” (Boyle, Rowe and Whannel, 2010; 247). Arguably, the growth of social media platforms through which the ‘audience’ can interact among themselves and with journalists has rendered the traditional, institutional media obsolete in its ability to amass and influence audiences (Rowe and Hutchins, 2014). Moreover, it has been contended that the altered media ecosystem arising from the digital revolution has blurred previously clear distinctions, such as those between print journalist and broadcast journalist, and between news journalist and sports journalist. This hybridity is captured by Baym, who writes: “In a media landscape marked by the fluidity of content and the permeability of form, genres have become deeply hybrid” (2010: 377).

In autobiographical works, sports journalists have reflected on their working practices and their place in the newsroom (Hughes, 2005; Humphries, 2003; Walsh, 2012). Humphries and Hughes both offer insight into the insecurities that sports journalists can feel, both about the shelf-life of their careers and the sense of professional standing they have within the sports department itself and the newsroom more widely. While both books are not scholarly texts and are very much written with a view to entertaining the reader through dashes of humour and anecdote, they do afford some insight into issues of ethics and identity. Humphries suggests that sports journalists operate on the periphery of the journalistic profession, or are at least regarded as such by colleagues working on other sections: “It is said that we sports hacks are hopeless creatures trapped between two real professions, either one of which we would like to be good at: sports or writing. I think of that often, especially when my kids ask me just what it is that I do” (Humphries, 2003: 24). Humphries also recounts his sense of awkwardness about his role during a time when his employer, *The Irish Times*, was seeking to make a large number of redundancies. He concedes that his deployment to Salt Lake City to cover the Winter Olympics sits a little uneasily with him: “The paper is disintegrating. Everyone on board is fretting about the future and I’m providing cheery thoughts from abroad. Any wonder they call us the Toy Department?” (Humphries, 2003: 38). While Humphries seeks to write with self-deprecating wit, the theme arises again just a few pages

later, where he refers to the “widely shared theory in the sports department that the rest of the journalists on the paper loathe us” (2003: 44). He continues:

The loathe us and our dim-witted ways. They despise our unstructured jobs here in the paper’s Toy Department. They assume that we spend all day, every day, flicking towels at each other’s butts and talking about Pamela Anderson. Especially, they abhor our expensive habit of travelling abroad to cover events that are on TV anyway. When times are hard, their loathing of us increases as an exponential of the paper’s diminished revenue and circulation (Humphries, 2003: 44-45).

However, elsewhere Humphries suggests that professional kudos – or at least recognition – for a sports journalist is directly connected to their willingness to make a stand; or, as he phrases it, pick a fight:

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

Invoking a phrase from a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century American sports writer, Humphries claims there is an inherent superficiality in the sports journalist’s working routine and approach:

As Jimmy Cannon said, sportswriters are entombed in eternal boyhood. Every day is a new beginning in the Toy Department. Slate wiped clean. New story. New game. Next interview. We move blithely on, skimming the surface of everything, hopping on the pond lilies above a deeper world. We’re surprised when people remember some published slight from two years ago. We are shocked by the sheer intricacy of the real world. We’re momentarily baffled when some old story resurfaces with more to it than we had ever allowed for. We write about people who live in another universe, but we exist in quite an odd place ourselves. There’s a dimension missing (Humphries, 2003: 243-244).

These reflections can be connected to the concept invoked above of 'ball watching' and Jennings' criticism of what he regards as many sports journalists' superficial reporting. Again, this underscores how issues of professional identity and ethics in sports journalism overlap, with this often arising in connection with issues of the depth or superficiality of coverage.

A number of texts have explored the connection between journalistic professional identity and values (Belsey, 1998; Schudson, 2001; Sanders, 2003, Keeble, 2009). In his analysis of how objectivity became what he terms an "occupational ideal" in journalism, Schudson claims that a spirit of self-protection motivated the promotion from within the industry of objectivity as a value, which in turn enabled journalists to bestow on themselves a positive sense of self-worth:

Journalists live in the public eye. They are uninsulated from public scrutiny – they have no recondite language, little fancy technology, no mirrors and mysteries to shield them from the public. There are strong reasons for journalists to seek publicly-appealing moral norms to protect them from criticism, embarrassment, or lawsuits, and to give them guidance in their work to prevent practices that would provoke criticism or even lawsuits, and to endow their occupation with an identity they can count as worthy (Schudson, 2001: 165).

Schudson's theorising is focused on the growth of journalism in the United States rather than the UK, and it is not concerned directly with sports journalism. However, he is not the only voice in the literature who seeks to make a connection between journalistic identity and ethical behaviour. In an era of increasingly convergent digital media and the phenomenon of vortextuality, in which online and print producers feed off one another's content at great rapidity (Whannel, 2002), Keeble implicitly suggests that questions of journalistic identity and journalistic ethics cannot be easily disentangled:

Along with the plethora of media outlets go the many journalistic roles: reporters, designers, sub-editors, reviewers, photographers, editors, freelancers, broadcast producers, camera (or camera phone) operators, web designers, researchers, HTML

experts. As the various platforms (print, online, video, podcasting and so on) converge so the boundaries between journalists' different tasks merge. And the range of specific ethical dilemmas ends up being enormous. Is it possible to speak in general terms? (Keeble, 2009: 1-2)

One who arguably does speak in general terms is Belsey, who considers what he terms the "Manichean" tension between "industrial" journalism and the "profession" of journalism, the former being a notion that focuses on journalism's need to turn a profit, the latter notion being one that he argues brings an ethical dimension to the industry (Belsey, 1998: 11). Trying to inhabit both dimensions is, he suggests, "difficult, if not contradictory":

(Journalism is a) two-sided reality but one in which the two sides contradict rather than complement each other. On the one hand journalism is an industry, a major player in the profit-seeking market economy, and journalists are merely workers in that industry, driven by the need to make a living. On the other hand, journalism is a profession, a vocation founded on ethical principles which direct and regulate the conduct of the practitioner (Belsey, 1998: 3).

Here, it is the sense of journalism being a vocation and a profession that imbues its practitioners with an appreciation of the need for their work to be guided by values or regulatory codes. Despite this, Belsey is dismissive of the search to state the necessary and sufficient conditions for an activity to be called a profession. What matters, he contends, is that the occupation is based on solid ethical principles: "Professional status tends to be a self-awarded honorific these days, a fact that is of more sociological than ethical significance" (Belsey, 1998: 9). Belsey may have been writing before the advent of social media, but his words offer a starting point from which to consider whether or not it is important that journalism – and sports journalism – is regarded as a profession. It is possible that the way that journalists perceive their industry – as a profession or a trade, for example – could skew their attitude to ethics. Cohen-Almagor, for example, states that portions of the media conceive media ethics to be an "oxymoron", with "many people in the industry portray[ing] their work as a hack, a trade and not as a profession, in order to legitimise their moral-free conduct" (Cohen-Almagor, 2001: xvii). Elsewhere, a survey of 285 sports journalists in the



United States concluded that “adherence to ethical standards is linked to an outlook that embraces sports coverage as public service” (Hardin, Zhong and Whiteside, 2009: 319), and that “the more a reporter sees his or her journalistic role within Fourth Estate, ‘watchdog’ terms, the more the reporter will seek to adhere to the norms that have been adopted by the profession” (Hardin, Zhong and Whiteside, 2009: 335). Claims of the oxymoronic nature of statements about ethics and the journalism industry have generated firm responses by those who regard journalism as an inherently moral activity. A credo for this position comes in Harcup’s textbook on journalism ethics:

Ethical journalism is not an oxymoron. Ethical journalism is not only possible, it is essential; not just for journalists’ sense of self-worth, but for the health and well-being of society. It requires journalists – wherever they work – to be reflective practitioners, engaged in a constant process of reflection and learning while doing their job. And it requires journalists to be prepared to voice their concerns within the newsroom (Harcup, 2007: 144).

The phrase “sense of self-worth” is important, as it suggests that notions of journalistic ethics and identity are intertwined. If one regards one’s activities in industry as an ethical pursuit, then one is potentially more likely to treat one’s role within it as professional and view it as distinct from others (for example, citizen journalists or bloggers).

### *3.8.2: Codes of Conduct*

Journalistic ethics, then, are often seen as interwoven with issues of journalistic professional identity. One of the bridges that connects professional ethics with professional identity is the code of conduct. Such codes are usually perceived as operating from deontological – that is, duty-based – foundations (Keeble, 2009), and, on one view, aim “to create a collective conscience of a profession” (Keeble, 2009: 15). The first code of practice in the UK was introduced by the National Union of Journalists in 1936 (Sambrook, 2012: 9), and there are two self-regulatory codes for news publishers: the Editors’ Code of Practice (IPSO, 2019) overseen by the Independent Press Standards Organisation, and IMPRESS’s Standards Code (IMPRESS, 2017). Broadcasters are governed by the Broadcasting Code (Ofcom, 2019), with

the BBC having its Editorial Guidelines (BBC, n.d.) A bespoke, internationally-applicable code of conduct for sports journalism has been proposed recently (Ramon-Vegas and Rojas-Torrijos, 2018). The continued global relevance of codes to media practice was reinforced in June 2019 when the International Federation of Journalists adopted its Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists at the IFJ World Congress in Tunis (International Federation of Journalists, 2019). However, it has been argued that journalistic codes are inadequate by themselves in terms of stimulating ethical behaviour or in limiting and preventing unethical behaviour, and need to be augmented by a wider engagement by journalists in matters of ethics as they apply to the industry (Cairns, 2018; Luckhurst and Phippen, 2014).

A code of practice can be regarded as a necessary condition for an industry to be regarded as a profession, bestowing on its practitioners the weight of moral obligation and professional standards (Cohen-Almagor, 2001). However, views on the relevance and importance of codes differ hugely, from those who view them (for different reasons) redundant, to those who regard them as an important check on media excess and an important vehicle for building and/or maintaining trust in the media. Some contend that codes “all have one thing in common: they are not worth the paper they are written on” (Norris, 2000: 325) because to imagine that a journalist who is chasing a story up against deadline is going to consult a code is “to live in cloud-cuckoo land” (Norris, 2000: 329). In considering why codes of practice are criticised for being “pointless, unnecessary and a form of professional window-dressing”, Sanford Horner argues that they are undermined by a lack of understanding by the members of the profession, a lack of sanctions, and by being too general to guide behaviour in specific cases (Sanford Horner, 2015: 228). However, he argues that such codes have their place, reminding journalists that “professional behaviour transcends technical concerns and competencies” (ibid.).

An important distinction is whether codes capture values or procedures; or, perhaps, both simultaneously. It has been argued that this is a vital point to clarify as news organisations seek to improve the levels of trust that the public has in them: “Serious news organisations, as opposed to those primarily interested in entertainment, increasingly need to develop codes which capture their *values* as well as their *practice and procedures*” (Sambrook, 2012: 31). Sambrook also argues that the burgeoning levels of digital information requires

audiences to take a more critical approach; codes alone are insufficient. Codes are not necessarily obsolete, but they need to be accompanied by higher levels of digital literacy among consumers:

In the digital environment, with a plethora of sources of variable quality, the focus inevitably moves from regulating (even with a loose professional code) the provider to educating the consumer.... Just as we recognize the need to educate the public on nutrition, and on financial prudence, we may increasingly need to educate them too on the benefits of a balanced and judicious information diet and how to develop greater levels of critical awareness.... The age of information surplus has shifted the responsibility for trusted content more substantially towards the consumer – although they may not yet be equipped for the task (Sambrook, 2012: 36-37).

The future development of codes of conduct would seem to be inextricably connected to the question of what it is to be a journalist – specifically, a sports journalist – in a changing digital media landscape. Traditional, top-down codes of practice, it has been argued, will be ineffectual in a fragmented media landscape:

The established codes of ethics and past practices of professional journalists have... a top-down form of centralised authority and control that is codified as standards of practice and sometimes laws. The code of ethics that will arise in the midst of our current technological revolution must engage the user of social media networks who operates in a decentralised environment that does not feature such conventional controls (German, 2011: 259).

Cairns argues that compliance and adherence to regulation are not enough; there needs to be a deeper understanding and appreciation of ethical nuance by his sports journalists (Cairns, 2018). This echoes Luckhurst and Phippen's distinction between rules and values. Rules-based systems of journalistic regulation, they contend, foster a culture of "box-ticking" and "evasion", and have repeatedly failed since the 1947 Royal Commission into standards in the press heralded self-regulatory processes: "Rules are too easily regarded as little more than an incentive not to get caught" (Luckhurst and Phippen, 2014: 57). Journalism based on

values, by contrast, cultivates a stronger sense of moral awareness among practitioners. Furthermore, a reflective, values-infused journalism offers a greater chance of cultivating ethical journalists than state-backed press regulation:

Ethics offer a realistic pathway to standards that regulation of the type Leveson proposed can never guarantee. They augment the rule of law with a dimension that requires reporters to think not about what they can get away with, but about what they ought to do. Ethics place the power to improve the profession in the hands of practitioners (Luckhurst and Phippen, 2014: 60).

A theme that emerges in the literature is that sports media regulation is not a simple concept that means the same thing for one sports journalism outlet as it does to another. McEnnis's 2018 case study examines the work routines of sports journalists working for Sky Sports News and *The Sun* and provides an intricate discussion of what regulation means for sports broadcast journalism versus sports print journalism. A central thrust of his paper, informed by his own journalistic experience, is that the routines of TV sports journalists are more influenced by regulatory codes than those of print sports journalists. This leads to the somewhat provocative conclusion that, for print journalists, "freedom of the press means freedom to make unethical deals with corporate organisations" (McEnnis, 2018: 51).

The notion of a bespoke code for sports journalism is considered and proposed by Ramon-Vegas and Rojas-Torrijos (2018), who contend that the purpose of a specific code for the sports journalism industry is two-fold: to raise awareness within the industry of sports journalists' accountability and, secondly, to enhance the public's perception of sports journalists' credibility, which has partly been eroded by the collapse of the frontier between fact and comment. They have drawn up their own ten-point code which, they say, seeks to "bridge the gap between the ideal and professional practice" (Ramon-Vegas and Rojas-Torrijos, 2018: 23). The code is ambitious in scope, not least the section in Clause 7 (Promotion of positive sports values) which asserts that sports journalists "should contribute to the promotion of positive values, such as... international peace and understanding through their coverage of sports events among citizens, with special attention for youth and children" (Ramon-Vegas and Rojas-Torrijos, 2018: 24). While some sports journalists might balk at the

notion of their practice having to adhere to ostensibly political ends, the final clause of the decalogue provides a call for a depth and richness of coverage that echoes Rowe (2005 and 2007):

Sports journalists should go beyond the dramatic action on the field and raise public awareness about relevant contexts that exist behind the play. Sports should be thoroughly explained from their social, financial, cultural and political dimensions (ibid.).

The international sports journalism-specific code proposed by Ramon-Vegas and Rojas-Torrijos could, then, be a way of raising editorial standards in the manner long-envisioned by Rowe. However, such a code is unlikely to have the desired outcome unless sports journalists recognise its authority. Investigations therefore need to be done into how sports journalists regard codes of conduct.

### **3.9 Summary**

This literature review builds on the case study contained in Chapter 2, exploring issues around self-censorship, ethics, social media and professional identity in sports journalism, as well as codes of conduct. Gaps in the existing literature have emerged. The literature around sports journalism contains some penetrating insights into the ethical issues that confront sports journalists in the UK, but in some instances these are either in need of further exploration (Cairns, 2018) or in need of updating for a social media era (Boyle, 2006a). Self-censorship is a topic that has received some attention when applied to journalism generally (Sturges, 2008; Preston, 2009; Binns, 2017a), and is indirectly referred to in a number of works into the sports media (Boyle, 2006a and 2006b; Hardin, Zhong and Whiteside, 2009; Sefiha, 2010), but a more explicit and nuanced investigation is required for sports journalism. While some work has been done on codes of conduct as they affect sports journalists (Ramon-Vegas and Rojas-Torrijos, 2018), more work is needed into codes as they affect British sports journalists in the wake of the Leveson Inquiry (2012). While some sports writers have used autobiography to provide a sense of what it is to be sports journalist (Hughes, 2006; Humphries, 2003), a sustained, rigorous study of moral agency and the lived experience of being a contemporary sports journalist in the digital era is missing from the literature. The following chapter explains

the methodological underpinning and methods that will be used to provide insight into these issues.

## **Chapter 4 – Methodology: Research Design and a Kantian Theoretical Perspective**

### *4.1 Introduction*

Qualitative research methods, specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and autoethnography (AE), are used in this thesis to provide an original analysis of the research objectives, supplemented by the type of Kantian philosophical reasoning previously expounded and deployed in Chapter 2. The primary research approach, IPA, comprises two strands: ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of UK sports journalists; and three dairies kept by sports journalists. A key text on IPA emphasises the power of IPA interviews and dairies as data collection methods when the objective is to acquire a rich sense of the participants' lived experience:

IPA is best suited to one [a data collection method] which will invite participants to offer a rich, detailed first-person account of their experiences. In-depth interviews and dairies may be the best means of accessing such accounts. These facilitate the elicitation of stories, thoughts and feelings about the target phenomenon. They are also consonant with an intimate focus on one person's experience and therefore are optimal for most IPA studies (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2012: 56).

These twin IPA methods – interviews and dairies – contribute to answering all four research objectives. IPA has acquired a reputation as being a useful means of investigating questions of identity, as Smith, Flowers and Larkin acknowledge, and it is intended and expected that issues of professional identity will be explored as part of RO4: “One of the interesting things to emerge from the growing corpus of IPA studies is how often identity becomes a central concern” (2012: 163).

Complementing the IPA methods is autoethnography. As with the IPA, this consists of two strands. The first strand is a two-and-a-half-year log kept during my work as a freelance sports journalist from August 2016 to March 2019, in which I reflect on ethical and editorial

challenges as they arise. The second is a log kept during my time covering the Rugby World Cup in Japan in October 2019. Both of these logs are in the form of what Ellis and Adams (2014) term a “personal narrative” in which I tell stories about my professional life in a first-person account. Indeed, the second log takes the form of an autophenomenography, in which the researcher writes in detail about their own lived experience of a particular process or event, in this case, the 2019 Rugby World Cup. Following the principles of autophenomenography delineated by Allen-Collinson (2012), I record my experiences from an insider’s perspective before returning to the transcribed accounts in increasing steps of “data-immersion” as I seek to identify themes. As with the IPA, the autoethnography contributes to answering all four research objectives.

Having worked as a sports journalist for 11 years with both legacy media companies, such as *The Times*, the BBC, and *The Guardian*, and ‘new’ media organisations, such as rugby365.com, and having spent a further eight years prior to that as a news journalist and editor, I have encountered a variety of ethical dilemmas and experienced a steadily shifting sense of professional roles and responsibilities as the digital revolution has unfolded. When used to complement IPA, my ongoing experience as a sports journalist provides another rich seam of data for analysis. By directing what O’Reilly terms “the ethnographic lens” onto myself (2012: 130) in the immediate aftermath of journalistic assignments it yields detailed findings with which the IPA data can be compared, contrasted and synthesised. Using the first-person data provided by the AE in parallel with the data gathered through in-depth IPA interviews and diaries – what could be termed the third-person data – produces unique insights. This combination of the first-person and the third-person enables key issues around moral agency and lived experience to be closely examined.

With their emphasis on capturing lived experience, using IPA and AE in tandem delivers a vivid sense of sports journalists’ working lives and practices, thereby helping to fulfil RO4 (“To capture the lived professional experience of modern sports journalists in the UK in the digital era and the implications of this for sports journalists’ professional identity”). The autoethnographic logs are informed by the same Kantian deontological idiom that was adopted in the exploratory case study. Other philosophical concepts – such as Wittgenstein’s notion of “family resemblance” (1953/2009: 66), which I had a methodological hunch would



be a useful means of analysing RO4 – are invoked to provide an original strand to the IPA and AE. Wittgenstein developed the concept of family resemblance as a means of explaining language, specifically to analysing the meaning of the same word at different moments. For Wittgenstein, the Platonic notion of a word having a firm, core meaning which is common to all instances of its use is wrong. Rather, the uses of the same word at different moments form “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing” (ibid.). This project transposes the concept of family resemblance to the process of defining sports journalists’ identity in the contemporary media landscape. There is no core, fixed meaning or role to being a ‘sports journalist’ today; rather, there is the “overlapping and criss-crossing” of certain activities and approaches.

The qualitative methods of IPA and AE, infused by philosophical reasoning, are therefore used to address the research objectives. However, before elaborating on these methods it is important that the research project’s epistemological, ontological and conceptual foundations are established in order to ensure its intellectual coherence. Epistemologically, for example, there is potentially a tension in the project between the interpretative aspect of interviews and diaries versus the *prima facie* objectivist underpinning of deontology/codes. The philosophical distinction between deontological and consequentialist approaches to ethics, already deployed in Chapter 2’s exploratory case study, will be expounded as part of the process of articulating and justifying the project’s Kantian conceptual underpinning.

The potential theoretical tensions between the different research methods in the project are explicated in this chapter and a resolution proposed, in what is termed a methodological synthesis of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and autoethnography. This chapter also considers the implications for research ethics posed by the project, which required a proposal to be submitted to the University of Gloucestershire’s Research Ethics Committee. The thesis’s focus on media ethics makes confidentiality a key issue. It is possible that incriminating, self-incriminating or defamatory statements could be made during the course of interviews or diaries. Yet it is vital for the integrity of the research that participants feel they can speak and write honestly about the ethical issues within the industry. As a result, the research provides anonymity to interviewees and those keeping diaries, and also removes the identification of individuals and organisations within those interviews and diary entries where

it is deemed there is a legal and/or ethical requirement to implement redaction. This ethical issue and others are considered in detail below.

#### *4.2 A Kantian Research Underpinning: Epistemology, Ontology and Paradigms*

The thesis aims to understand the ethical challenges, actions and decisions of sports journalists, and this presupposes a number of metaphysical stances, both epistemological and ontological. Do ethical judgments (e.g. that *x* is the right course of action, or that to do *y* is wrong) refer to objective facts? What is the meaning of a moral statement or utterance (e.g. “It is wrong not to publish accurate information” or “It is a journalist’s duty to report the full truth”)? What is the nature of ‘truth’ that sports journalists seek to report on? Do sports journalists operate with a free will, and so can they be held accountable for their actions? How accurately can a researcher be said to understand the ethical decisions of journalists when the decision-making process of each moral agent is personal, and in that sense epistemologically one-step removed from the researcher? These questions illustrate how articulating the epistemological and ontological foundations of the research project are not some abstruse activity, but an integral part of developing a philosophically coherent approach to addressing the project and its research questions. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide detailed answers to all the metaphysical questions posed above, but it is important to be cognisant of them because it is important for the coherence of the project that there be an alignment of the research paradigm, the philosophical beliefs that underpin that paradigm, and the research objectives (Grix, 2004: 32-33).

The case study in Chapter 2 began to articulate the Kantian framework of this study. The philosophical underpinning of this thesis – both in terms of the school of ethics from which it acquires its impetus, and the wider methodological basis – is derived from Kant (1781/1993; 1785/2005; 1788/1997). It is a piece of Kantian applied philosophy. As explored below, Kant was a critical realist, with a metaphysics that emphasised the importance of individual experience (the *phenomenal* world), while not excluding the possibility of the existence of a *noumenal* world that existed independently of phenomenal experience (1781/1993). Relatedly, in ethics, Kant emphasised the centrality of the experience of individual agency, of autonomy, while gesturing towards the existence of a natural law which – while grasped and

felt within by each moral agent – applied universally (Kant 1785/2005; 1788/1997; Scruton, 1997). Philosophical reasoning without any reference to experience – “pure reason” – was, for Kant, empty (1781/1993). This research project operates against this Kantian backdrop. It is the individual experience of participants, and their encounters with their own sense of moral agency, which provides the data from which the research objectives can be addressed. Phenomenological methods – methods which bring lived experience and the complexities of individual agency to the fore – therefore resonate with the project’s philosophical underpinning. All the while, this does not preclude the possibility of the existence of objective moral facts independent of the participants’ beliefs; a point which gives a critical realist twist to the interpretative thrust of the phenomenological methods.

As stated above, the approach to this project involves qualitative data with an emphasis on gathering the personal, lived experience of sports journalists and their sense of moral agency. The principal task of this chapter is to explicate the assumptions underpinning this approach, and to justify why the methods chosen will yield data that enables the research objectives to be met. This is given added importance because the epistemological approach underpinning qualitative research into sports journalism ethics has not always been made explicit. McEnnis, in his own semi-structured interview-based piece of qualitative research, notes that semi-structured interviewing has been a “common method in sport journalism research that explores working culture” (McEnnis 2013: 426) and cites Boyle (2006a) as an example. While the implicit paradigm within which McEnnis’s operates is interpretivist, no discussion is provided within his paper of the research’s paradigmatic underpinning. Similarly, in an examination of the levels of uniformity of content in the sports press, English (2014) uses in-depth interviews and content analysis of articles, contending that “a mixed-methods approach was employed to ensure a comprehensive analysis of the issues” (2014: 480), but – again – provides no mention of the paradigmatic assumptions. Hardin, Zhong and Whiteside’s (2009) research into the relationship between US sports reporters’ ethics and their attitudes to the profession is focused on quantitative data compiled from highly structured questions, with respondents given either ‘yes/no’ options or Likert Scale questions. Again, no consideration is given to paradigmatic assumptions. Similarly, Rowe (2007), in his analysis of findings from the 2005 international Sports Press Survey, does not offer an account of the theoretical foundations on which his research is built. However, Gibbs and Haynes (2013) do

provide evidence of a more detailed consideration of the theoretical perspective underlying their investigation into the impact of social media on sports media officers. They explicitly state that their research is “phenomenological”, with their study drawing “on the lived experiences of sports media professionals” to give “insight into the transformation of sport media relations in response to social-media and digital-media culture” (2013: 396). This approach, which has a method consisting of semi-structured long interview questions (ibid.), is clearly interpretivist. However, such detail about the theoretical perspective underpinning a piece of sports journalism research appears to be rare.

The vocabulary around paradigms can be imprecise, and when considering what would widely be regarded as the interpretivist paradigm Crotty at times calls it “constructionist” and “subjectivist” research (1998: 15). These terms are useful because they capture aspects of the interpretivist paradigm. For the interpretivist, the world is socially constructed and so has no meaning – or even existence – apart from that which is imposed upon it by individuals. The subjective experiences of individuals thus become of paramount interest to the interpretivist, who believes that the way to understand the world is through the individuals who create and interact with it. Unlike positivism – the paradigm that is the natural bedfellow of objectivism – interpretivism believes that researchers are not neatly ‘set apart’ from their research, but that their values and understandings are necessarily caught up in the very act of research. The notion of an entirely neutral, detached researcher is thus a bogus one (Crotty: 1998).

Elements of interpretivism look plausible for a thesis into the ethics of sports journalism, not least one that proposes to adopt the approach of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. A central element of this thesis is IPA interviews with sports journalists, investigating the ethical dilemmas they have experienced during their work and their broader professional lived experience. Journalists’ subjective experiences forms a considerable part of the inquiry, and such experiences are regarded as providing a useful understanding of the world of sports journalism. The same can be said of the diary-keeping that forms the other strand of the IPA. However, as the vocabulary used above indicates, interpretivism tends towards subjectivism, and is therefore inclined to be suspicious of objective values. This could potentially put the interpretivist paradigm in tension with an exploration of codes of practice, the phrasing of which suggests an objectivist, realist view of moral statements (codes are phrased

deontologically with the implication that *all* should abide by them because they are binding (e.g. “1iv) The Press, while free to editorialise and campaign, must distinguish clearly between comment, conjecture and fact” and “3i) Journalists must not engage in intimidation, harassment or persistent pursuit” (IPSO, 2019). There is also a tension for the thesis if my wider philosophical positions on ontology and epistemology commit me to a conception of moral values that is realist. However, these two concerns can arguably be overcome by attending closely to the wording of RO3, which refers to exploring the “relevance and impact of codes of conduct” on sports journalists. The objective makes it clear that the project is not about the truth or otherwise of the edicts contained in codes’ clauses. Rather, it is about understanding research participants’ views on the “relevance and impact” of codes. A realist stance on the nature of codes can thus be harmonised with an interpretivist approach to the analysis of codes.

While emphasising the importance of the interpretivist focus on individual meaning-making and the insight provided by personal perspectives on ethical debates, this project does not preclude the possibility that discussions about ethics refer to values that are independently existing. A form of critical realism, as defined by Maxwell, thus resonates as a paradigm from which the research project can be conducted:

Critical realism combines a realist ontology (the belief that there is a real world that exists independently of our beliefs and constructions) with a constructivist epistemology (the belief that our *knowledge* of this world is inevitably our own construction, created from a specific vantage point, and that there is no possibility of our achieving a purely “objective” account that is independent of all particular perspectives). All knowledge is thus “theory-laden,” but this does not contradict the existence of a real world to which this knowledge refers (2012: vii).

Critical realism, of which Kant is an exponent, allows a realist ontology about ethical values to be invoked. Metaphysics and ethics are closely connected for Kant, and it is through his metaphysics that a prerequisite of genuine ethical judgment – the freedom of the will – is arguably secured (Kant, 1781/1993: 20-21). There is not space here to discuss the philosophical complexities of this, but it is important to note for this project that Kant uses

his metaphysics to establish something without which the activity of ethical praise and censure makes little sense: free will. As my research objectives implicitly suppose that the decisions and actions of sports journalists can merit praise or blame, Kant's version of critical realism provides another component in my emerging research paradigm.

This paradigm is, of course, open to criticism. Interpretivists, inspired by a constructivist ontology, might contend that it invokes too many entities. They might deploy Occam's Razor – which states that no more entities should be posited by a theory than is needed to get an explanation – in an effort to undermine it. Positivists would balk at the Kantian emphasis on normative value. However, when Maxwell's and Kant's versions of critical realism are blended, it provides the beginnings of a theoretical perspective that enables my metaphysics, paradigm and research aims to interlink. As such, it provides intellectual consistency and prevents an accusation of the kind of illogicality which Grix (2004) warns against.

The spirit of Kant animates this project methodologically, not only with the paradigm of critical realism articulated above, but with Kant's emphasis on deontology too. As already seen in Chapter's 2's case study, a Kantian deontology provides a theoretical perspective from which sports journalism ethics can be usefully investigated. In the case study, a Kantian idiom was used to conceptually analyse the ethical and practical decisions that David Walsh and other cycling journalists have made in the course of gathering and publishing their stories. The chapter developed the concept of 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. It considered the conditional "if..., then..." structure of hypothetical imperatives (e.g. "If you want to retain smooth interview access to cycling team Cheetah, then don't ask questions about doping") versus the unconditional nature of the categorical imperative (e.g. "You ought to tell the truth about wrongdoing in sport"). The distinction between the Kantian "autonomous" moral agent – the person who behaves according to the dictates of their independent reason and will – and the "heteronomous" person, whose will is constrained by external forces, such as their individual desires or the aim of satisfying the wishes of a parent or a perceived god-like figure, was also used as part of the Walsh case study. This Kantian, deontological perspective will

continue to be applied in this project in the course of philosophically understanding the IPA and autoethnographic data.

#### 4.3 Deontology and Consequentialism

Deontology is an approach to ethics that emphasises the paramount importance of duty. Some of the assumptions behind deontology as a theoretical perspective will now be explored, as well as its place as a practical guide to media ethics.

Like the school of ethics with which it is contrasted, consequentialism (which requires agents to anticipate the consequences of their actions and pursue those actions which they believe will cause the greatest happiness to the greatest number), deontology assumes the autonomous decision-making of the moral agent. However, one contention is that autonomous agency has become a slippery and diluted concept due to the growth of digital media, and, concomitantly, that individual responsibility for media practitioners is now arguably an unstable notion. Ess invokes the concept of “distributed responsibility” in an attempt to capture this:

(in the West) we generally hold *individuals* responsible for their actions, as the *individual agent* who both makes decisions and acts independently of others. But these days, our interactions with one another increasingly take place via digital media and networks. This means, more specifically, that multiple actors and agents – not only multiple humans (including software designers as well as users), but also multiple computers, networks, ‘bots etc. – must work together to make specific acts (both beneficial and harmful) possible. So it appears that, in parallel with the distribution of information via networks, our *ethical responsibility* may be more accurately understood in terms of a *distributed responsibility*. That is, in contrast with a single person taking all the responsibility for his or her actions, ethical responsibilities for the various actions we are able to undertake via digital media and networks may be shared, so to speak, across the network (Ess, 2009: 17).

While Ess's point could apply to complicated online transactions involving multiple parties, it is difficult to see how distributed responsibility could be said to apply to an editor making the final call on whether or not to run a certain story, or a reporter on whether they should pose a specific question or not; these decisions remain individual ones. For the sake of ethical good practice, particularly in a post-Leveson environment, a case could be made too for there needing to be vigilance about any watering down of the sense of individual journalistic responsibility among journalists. This methodology assumes that its participants are autonomous agents bearing individual responsibility.

The overall deontological perspective of the project could be challenged on the basis that it overlooks other credible perspectives in applied media ethics, such as consequentialism. While there is not adequate space here to examine in detail the competing merits and weaknesses of deontology and consequentialism (and other schools of ethics), it should be pointed out that some recognisable scenarios make consequentialism look vulnerable as an approach to media ethics by. The consequentialist focus on the amount of pleasure or pain an action causes could, it has been argued, be used to justify illegal acts by journalists (e.g. phone hacking and other acts of subterfuge) as the sum total of pleasure (from audience consumption and reaction) could outstrip the pain of those who have been hacked or deceived (Sanford Horner, 2015: 31-48). Moreover, the deontological approach is buttressed by it being a perspective that is exemplified by one of most effective UK investigative journalists of recent times, Nick Davies, a journalist lauded in fulsome terms by an editor whose title, *The Guardian*, Davies repeatedly broke stories for (Rusbridger, 2018). Davies writes:

You could argue that every profession has its defining value.... For journalists the defining value is honesty – the attempt to tell the truth. That is our primary purpose. All that we do – and all that is said about us – must flow from the single-source of truth-telling (2008: 12).

Sanford Horner believes what Davies encapsulates is “essentially a deontological approach”, explaining: “What Davies is suggesting is that the moral imperative to tell the truth is not matter of calculation but a fundamental moral duty” (2015: 120).



The conceptual foundations of this project are therefore critical realist and deontological. The issue now arises of how the thesis's research methods align with that perspective and can be justified as a means of answering the research objectives.

#### **4.4 A Methodological Synthesis of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and Autoethnography**

##### *4.4.1 Justifying the Methods – An Overview*

This section provides a methodological synthesis of IPA and AE as I seek to develop a blend of research methods that enables me to answer my research questions into the field of sports journalism with rigour, depth, sophistication and originality. Attempting to effect a fusion between IPA and AE will be part of what IPA researchers Smith, Flowers and Larkin term the forging of “fertile theoretical connections [by IPA] with other qualitative approaches” (2012: 186). In particular, I will seek to utilise methods that are informed by a sub-division of AE known as autophenomenography (Allen-Collinson, 2012). In keeping with a fundamental tenet of AE, which is focused on the examination of the self in a particular social context, this section will deliberately make use of the first person pronoun, ‘I’, in exploring the choice, design and implementation of methods. The methodological position and methods that emerge are intended to offer a mature and innovative means of capturing qualitative data in my area of research. These qualitative methods are also intended to be supplemented by conceptual, philosophical analysis. My use and refashioning of IPA will involve a dialogue with philosophical theory, particularly Kant, and potentially Wittgenstein, as discussed above.

This section will also explore in detail the complexities and potential pitfalls in the research project arising from my particular circumstances as a researcher. The primary complexities arise from the fact that I remain a practising sports journalist and intend to interview fellow sports journalists as I seek to gather and interpret rich, in-depth accounts of their lived experiences. A central tenet of phenomenology and IPA is that the researcher is able to ‘bracket’ – or put to one side – presuppositions and assumptions in order to get to the essence of the subject under investigation (Allen-Collinson, 2012; Husserl, 1927; Smith, Flowers and

Larkin, 2012). But a question that arises from my professional position is whether my 'insider' status compromises my ability to 'bracket' and function with phenomenological rigour. Moreover, the IPA element of the project will involve a 'second-order' level of interpretation – the double hermeneutic of me, as a researcher, *interpreting* how my interviewees *interpret* their own experiences. Again, how does my 'insider' status compromise (or not) my ability to perform this double hermeneutic?

The IPA element of my methodology is not the only one to pose questions about my role as a researcher. By its very nature as a form of enquiry focused on the self (*auto*), AE raises fundamental questions around the position of the researcher, questions which in turn raise further basic questions about epistemology and ontology. For example, as a matter of definition, AE is a method that focuses on subjective experience, so how does the AE researcher balance the focus on subjective experience with the traditional requirement for researchers to be objective in order to provide 'valid' findings? Perhaps a corollary of AE is that the role of the researcher needs to be subjected to wholesale revision along with the concept of validity as traditionally conceived. Moreover, AE would appear to pose quite radical ontological questions. What is it that the autoethnographer is studying? Largely it is the self in a particular social context. But is this self a stable, enduring thing or an unstable, protean thing? As Allen-Collinson points out, these issues place a considerable intellectual burden on the autoethnographer:

Autoethnographers thus occupy a dual, and often highly demanding, role as both member of the social world under study and researcher of that same world. This demands of the autoethnographic researcher high levels of critical awareness and reflexivity and, many of us would add, self-discipline. (Allen-Collinson, 2012: 194)

Such levels of reflexivity will also be required for the IPA element of the research methodology, primarily due to the complexities arising from the 'insider' status outlined above.

#### 4.4.2 Research Objectives and Research Methods – A Brief History

In considering the link between research questions, methods and sources, Grix contends that “a research question (RQ) should lead to our method (M) and sources (S) (RQ->M->S)” (Grix, 2004: 31). Operating from this basis, a brief history of the evolution of my thinking on the research questions I am going to address will help convey how my position on my methods has developed, and how my research questions and methods align in the manner in which Grix suggests.

Overarching research objective: to examine the major ethical issues experienced by British sports journalists in the course of their practice in the digital media landscape, with a particular focus on self-censorship, and to capture the lived professional experience of sports journalists in the digital era

Research objectives:

RO1) To understand the extent to which sports journalists self-censor and how this could compromise their journalistic activity.

RO2) To identify and examine common ethical challenges experienced by British sports journalists in the course of their work in the modern digital media landscape.

RO3) To explore the relevance and impact of codes of conduct on sports journalists’ practice.

RO4) To capture the lived professional experience of modern sports journalists in the UK in the digital era and the implications of this for sports journalists’ professional identity.

Initially, I had envisaged that semi-structured interviews would be the primary method by which these aims would be met, with such interviews giving interviewees the environment in which to expand in detail on the ethical dilemmas that they encountered in their work. I had also anticipated that a form of digital ethnography and “virtual fieldwork” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 137) would be adopted due to the quantity of sports journalism that is gathered and distributed through social networks. My thinking then altered. While semi-

structured interviews remained a key method by which I intended to gather data for the project, I anticipated conducting fewer but deeper interviews than I had originally intended (around 10, rather than 20), primarily as a result of my reading into IPA and IPA's emphasis on fewer but deeper sources, and its related focus on idiography, which focuses on the richness of findings that can stem from detailed studies of the particular. Moreover, I decided to broaden out the IPA by gathering data through diaries too, hoping to find between three and five sports journalists willing to keep a log for between six months and a year. As an additional step, I felt this idiographic richness would be deepened further when supplemented by AE. Initially, I intended to produce just one piece of AE: a three-year log reflecting on the ethical and editorial issues arising in the course of my work as a sports journalist. However, when the opportunity arose to cover the 2019 Rugby World Cup in Japan, I decided to incorporate a separate log that focused on the lived experience of covering a major international tournament.

#### *4.4.3 Autoethnography*

The following overview of AE encapsulates the reasons why I believe a form of AE is appropriate to my research project. Autoethnography, as two researchers have put it, refers to:

research, writing, stories, and methods that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political. This approach considers personal experience as an important source of knowledge in and of itself, as well as a source of insight into cultural experience. (Ellis and Adams, 2014: 254)

By incorporating my own carefully interpreted experiences as a practising national journalist into my project, the intention is to provide a rich set of data for analysis. It is intended that by paying close, sustained attention to a particular sub-culture of which I, the researcher, am a member (i.e. the sub-culture of UK sports journalists) I will gather an additional, complementary perspective to that provided through IPA. As Allen-Collinson puts it:

(Autoethnography is) a research approach which draws upon the researcher's own personal lived experience, specifically in relation to the culture (and subcultures) of

which s/he is a member... The researcher, in her/his social interaction with others, is the subject of the research, thus blurring putative distinctions between the personal and the social, and between self and other. (Allen-Collinson, 2012: 193)

When researching autoethnographically, a researcher “uses tenets of *autobiography* and *ethnography* to *do* and *write* autoethnography” (Ellis *et al*, 2011: 1). However, AE is not a uniform practice. It is, it has been argued, a term with “a double sense – referring either to the ethnography of one’s own group or to autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest” (Reed-Danahay, 1997). For some autoethnographic researchers who emphasise the former sense, the ‘insider’ status is central because autoethnography is an anthropologist’s study of his or her “own people” (Hayano, 1979: 99). In seeking to understand whether a researcher is working autoethnographically or not, Hayano asserts that it should be asked whether the researcher has “often permanent self-identification with a group and full internal membership, as recognised both by themselves and the people of whom they are a part” (1979: 100). Reed-Danahay, in a discussion of Hayano’s approach and also that of Van Maanen (1995) and Strathern (1987), seeks to encapsulate this approach to AE by describing it as “a form of writing wherein the ethnographer is the native... the emphasis is not on a life story but on an ethnography of one’s own culture” (Reed-Danahay, 1997: 5). This captures to a significant extent the methodological animus of this project’s autoethnographic element. It is my intention to capture the behaviours and decision-making of my observed peers. However, the project does not wish to underplay the other strand to AE, the strand which emphasises the autobiographical. Denzin (1989) describes an AE as a text that combines ethnography and autobiography: “For Denzin, autoethnography entails the incorporation of elements of one’s own life experience when writing about others through biography or ethnography” (Reed-Danahay, 1995: 6). My own experiences as a sports journalist will be woven into the log, with detailed reflections on those experiences. As such, I am both observing others and self-observing. My AE, especially the Rugby World Cup log, is intended to exemplify a sub-species of AE – autophenomenography – in which the researcher writes in detail about their own lived experience of a particular process or event. Allen-Collinson (2012) has used autophenomenography as the means to research two individuals’ experiences of recovering from significant sporting injury. My research project involves the step of using autophenomenography as a means of studying the sports media, rather than sporting activity.

A fundamental question that presents itself is whether the industry of sports journalism is a suitable subject for AE. O'Reilly states that AE accounts are "especially popular in vocational disciplines, such as nursing, health and education" (2012: 130) and on this basis it can be contended that sports journalism is simply another vocation upon which the autoethnographic lens can be turned.

When used to complement IPA, I believed from an early stage in the research project that my ongoing personal experience as a sports journalist could be a powerful method to explore RO1-RO4. However, it was important to understand and justify the stance that I would adopt as an AE researcher.

A central issue when formulating a rigorous methodology for a thesis that combines both 'traditional' qualitative methods (interviewing, diary-keeping) and AE is the balance that needs to be struck between involvement and detachment. While writing in the context of ethnographic research in the social sciences, Buscetto illuminates issues that have a bearing on the current project:

How, then, can we guarantee that researchers do not become travellers, journalists or autobiographical novelists while at the same time ensuring that they are not constrained to practise ill-adapted procedures and investigation methods following an inept positive method? What is required above all is reconciling the opposites of involvement and detachment (2016: 140).

My involvement with the group that is being researched, UK sports journalists, is extensive, professionally necessary, and – perhaps most importantly – pre-dates the outset of the research project. My membership of the group of contemporary UK sports journalists is a pre-existing membership, one that is in some ways loose and uncodified but in other ways official (through membership of a body such as the Rugby Union Writers' Club, for example). In some ways, the research could be classified as a form of *participant observation* but this is an inadequate description given the pre-existing, seamless nature of the way research is carried out 'in the field'. Gobo and Marciniak refer to a scale of participation, with the researcher

inhabiting a space somewhere “from complete observer, through observer as participant, participant as observer, up to complete participant” (2016: 105). While the “complete participant” tag has some initial plausibility in capturing my role, this scale arguably fails to capture the nature of my participation, given that the participation is pre-existing and imbued with the experiences and insights acquired through many years of professional experience. Similarly, that is why the “Five distinctive characteristics of participant observation” that they proffer do not capture my research position:

- the researcher establishes a direct relationship with the social actors
- staying long in their natural environment
- with the purpose of observing and describing their social actions
- by interacting with them and participating in their everyday ceremonials and rituals, and
- learning their code (or at least part of it) in order to understand the meaning of their actions (ibid.)

The characteristics all imply that the researcher is starting from a position of non-acquaintance and relative ignorance, while I begin from a position of pre-existing (and evolving) knowledge. I have already participated in, and continue to participate in, what could be termed the rituals of newsgathering and post-match interviewing, for example, and – prior to the start of the research project – was already literate in the “code” used by sports journalists, such as the vocabulary used by sports journalists in their interactions with one another and their editors, and aspects of the implicit code governing sports journalists’ interactions with one another. As such, participant observation does not serve to capture the nature of the research, although it is true that the experiences that I reflect on are acquired through me both participating as a sports journalist in the field and observing what happens in that field as other journalists go about their work alongside me.

Following Buscatto (2016: 147), it is not contended that the proposed AE method has absolute superiority over other methods, but that it has heuristic benefits over others in studying the

subject at hand. When done alongside IPA, it is argued that AE will provide a rich set of data that is both original and insightful for addressing RO1-RO4.

#### 4.4.4 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

What makes Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis a suitable method for this research project? While it is true that IPA was initially primarily used by applied psychologists (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2012), its methods are amenable to being used in new areas, particularly those where inner tensions – such as the ones posed by ethical issues – arise:

We expect that dedicated IPA studies will continue to develop and appear in a range of exciting and stimulating subject areas, and indeed that the range of those areas will be ever increasing, and we hope that researchers will continue to find IPA to be an accessible, flexible and useful approach to understanding what something is like, from the perspective of the person who is trying to make sense of it (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2012: 204).

IPA is interpretative in that it involves the researcher performing the *double hermeneutic* of interpreting the participant's interpretation, and it is phenomenological in that participants provide a "rich, detailed first-person account of their experiences" (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2012: 56). A twist to the proposed use of IPA is that it is done more from the standpoint of applied philosophy rather than applied psychology.

The research objectives above are concerned with ethical issues that arise in the workplace and with capturing a vivid sense of what it means to *be* a contemporary sports journalist. *Prima facie*, IPA would appear to be well-suited as a means of investigating these areas because the focus of phenomenological social enquiry is concerned with obtaining a detailed understanding of personal lived experience (Gibbs and Haynes, 2013; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, M., 2012).



As well as interviews, diaries are used as a source of obtaining IPA data. The benefits of using diaries are highlighted by Hammersley and Atkinson. They provide a counterpoint to the interviews, with the two strands then able to be synthesised:

Solicited written accounts, such as diaries and narratives, are especially useful ways of obtaining information about the personal and the private. When carefully managed, and with suitable cooperation from informants, the diary, in particular, can be used to record data that might not be forthcoming in face-to-face interviews or other data collection encounters (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 127).

Interpretation is a vital part of IPA. Indeed, one strand of hermeneutics that has influenced IPA, that stemming from Schleiermacher, contends that a deep analysis of a text can provide the person doing the interpreting with “an understanding of the utterer better than he understands himself” (Schleiermacher, 1838/1998: 266). This is a bold, contentious claim, but one does not have to subscribe to it in order to subscribe to this research project’s more modest claim that a synthesis of IPA and AE can deliver deep levels of understanding about the nature and ethical dimensions of contemporary sports journalism. These methods have thus been chosen because of their potential to complement one another in the pursuit of insight into the research objectives.

#### *4.4.5 Compatibility of Methods – Hermeneutic Awareness*

A question that arises is whether the methodological positions of IPA and AE, and the methods that flow from them, are compatible. In particular, it might be objected that IPA’s requirement that researchers ‘bracket’ their presuppositions and individual theories when gathering their research data is inconsistent with AE’s emphasis on the explicit prominence given to the researcher’s own personal experience and theorising. While there is a tension between these two positions, I believe it can be overcome with what I shall term *hermeneutic awareness*.

In order for the reconciliation to be brought about, it is important that some important similarities between IPA and AE are emphasised. Firstly, both positions are interpretivist,

concerned as they are with the interpretation of people's "meaning-making" activities (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2012: 18), and they both acknowledge the significance of the insight that such interpretations can provide. Furthermore, both IPA and AE are idiographic, emphasising the value of the particular and the case study. In their seminal overview of IPA, Smith, Flowers and Larkin stress that "Idiography is concerned with the particular" (2012: 29) and emphasise the richness of findings that can flow from the painstaking interpretation of a small, purposively-selected sample or even a single case study. This methodological point is mirrored in Ellis and Adams' writings about AE when they state: "We write concrete stories about our lives because we think that the stories of a *particular* life can provide a useful way of knowing about *general* human experience" (2014: 255). While a wariness of moving from the particular to the general is important – MacIntyre, for example, contends that the best generalisations about social life "will be prefaced not by universal quantifiers but by some such phrase 'Characteristically and for the most part...'" (2007: 104) – it is important to acknowledge that, epistemologically and ontologically, IPA and AE both share common idiographic roots and both recognise the power of the rigorous analysis of the particular. So much so that the following extract from Smith, Flowers and Larkin's discussion of IPA's focus on idiography could be those of Ellis and Adams reflecting on AE:

The insightful case study may take us into the universal because it touches on what it is to be human at its most essential. The specifics are unique, but they are hung on what is shared and communal. This in turn echoes the original insight of Schleiermacher, 'that everyone carries a minimum of everyone else within them' (2012: 38).

IPA and AE, then, have a significant amount in common in terms of their philosophical basis. This shared foundation helps make the reconciliation of the methodological tension described at the start of this section easier to effect. As long as the tension is acknowledged and I am clear in my own mind as a researcher precisely when I am fulfilling an IPA research role and when I am performing AE, then the two can function in parallel. Such *hermeneutic awareness* can thus defuse the tension, although it does require an enduring and constant state of reflexivity.

Having established the theoretical underpinnings and legitimacy of the project, this chapter now moves on to describe the specifics of how the research was designed and implemented.

#### **4.5 Design of Project**

In order to meet the four research objectives outlined above, the research project had the following design.

All four research objectives were investigated through a blend of IPA and AE. The IPA comprised two strands. Firstly, in-depth, semi-structured face-to-face interviews with a sample of ten UK sports journalists. In keeping with IPA's methodological principles, the sample was purposive and homogeneous (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2012: 49) in order to enable deep, rich data to be obtained. Homogeneity is, however, a relative concept. The sample was homogeneous in that all participants were UK sports journalists with a working life that involved them, to varying degrees, using social and digital media for professional purposes. This was done so as to enable the data to capture the way the digital era is affecting sports journalists' working practices and experiences. In order to capture a variety of experience, there were both staff members and freelancers, and reporters and editors. There was a mixture of male and female participants, although as the industry continues to be male-dominated the split was weighted 7:3 in terms of male/female. My contacts in the UK media ensured that the sample of interviewees was readily obtainable, and all potential participants were written to in advance having initially suggested either by email or telephone that they were willing to take part (*Appendix 1a*). The snowball process of participant selection was held in reserve but not required. Two of the interviews were conducted by telephone after attempts to arrange face-to-face interviews were repeatedly frustrated by the subjects' overseas travel and work commitments. While the telephone is not an ideal medium for an IPA interview, the prominence and experience of the journalists involved made them important participants, hence their inclusion.

The second strand of IPA data was diaries kept by three sports journalists for a minimum of six months. These participants were different to the interviewees, ensuring the range of voices and experiences was widened. Again, all three were UK-based sports journalists using

social and digital media for professional purposes. To capture different shades of sports journalism, one was an editor, another a staff reporter, and a third a freelancer. All three were male, with it proving difficult to find sports journalists willing to dedicate the time needed to keep a diary for a sustained period of time. The rubric for the diaries asked the participants to reflect on ethical issues they encountered during the course of their work and how they negotiated them, with a particular emphasis on self-censorship. To ensure the diaries had depth, letters (*Appendix 1b*) and conversations provided guidance on making detailed and reflective entries. Eventually, the participants kept diaries for eight, 10 and 14 months, with the participants given licence to continue keeping their diaries for longer than originally specified if they wished. Both interviews and diary-keeping were undertaken because of the different but complementary insights they would provide. While an interviewee is by definition responsive to the questions put to them, a diary-keeper (once given the diary's parameters) has more time and opportunity to focus on issues of their selection.

In parallel with the IPA was another qualitative method: autoethnography. This also had two strands. The first was a two-and-a-half-year log kept during my work as a freelance sports journalist, in which I reflected on ethical and editorial challenges as they arose covering specific matches and events. The second was a log kept during my time covering the Rugby World Cup in Japan in October 2019.

Additionally, the analysis of ethical issues (RO1-3) was imbued with a perspective of Kantian applied philosophy, as articulated above, with other philosophical concepts invoked in addressing RO4.

#### **4.6 Implementation of Project**

The implementation incorporated principles of IPA research from Smith, Flowers and Larkin, who emphasise that central to the success of an IPA project is the depth of the data, which in turn is reliant on the quality of the interviews and the quality of the diary records that have been kept (2012). It was thus vital that interview technique was strong, and that participants in the diary-keeping were well-briefed. For the semi-structured interviews, this required that

open questions were posed and that, where necessary, research questions were approached subtly in order to make interviewees feel comfortable. While an interview schedule was constructed (*Appendix 2*), it was essential to be closely attuned to each interviewee's responses in order to ask pertinent follow-up questions. In addition, it was important – in accordance with phenomenological principles – that my preconceptions were, as far as possible, suspended (“bracketed”) so that the interviewee's own thoughts and reflections could emerge, untainted by my “own pre-existing concerns, hunches and theoretical hobby horses” (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2012: 64).

Following each interview data collection event, the interviews were carefully and reflectively transcribed by me verbatim. This process of considered transcription enabled the process of interpreting the interviews to begin. An initial line-by-line analysis of each transcript identified emergent themes. Subsequent readings of each transcript then led to a written distillation of each participant's interview, giving details of the emerging interpretation (*Appendices 3a-3j*). Common emerging themes across the different interviews began to be identified and noted (*Appendix 3k*). After each case had been written up separately, a second-order cross-case analysis was then performed that identified and analysed common themes pertinent to each research objective.

When each diary was submitted, there was the same approach of an initial line-by-line analysis that identified emergent themes. Notes were made that summarised key themes and the emerging interpretation, resulting in an initial distillation of each diary (*Appendix 4*). As with the interviews, after each case had been written up separately, a second-order cross-case analysis was carried out that identified common themes. The analysis of the interviews and the analysis of the diaries was then synthesised to enable a deeper investigation of the research objectives.

Complementing the IPA methods was the AE. These are in the form of what Ellis and Adams (2014) term a “personal narrative” in which I told stories about my professional life in a first-person account. Following the principles of autophenomenography delineated by Allen-Collinson (2012), I recorded my experiences covering certain journalistic assignments from an insider's perspective before repeatedly returning to the transcribed accounts as I sought to

identify themes. This process of data immersion resulted in a line-by-line analysis of my logs (*Appendix 5a-5b*) and the emergence of key themes, some of which were common to both (*Appendix 5c*). The fact I did this self-consciously as a researcher operating against a specific methodological and philosophical framework gave the AE an alternative dimension to the data gathered through IPA.

The themes emerging through IPA and AE were then triangulated and explored in order to deliver a deep analysis of the research objectives, harnessing the complementary thrusts of IPA and AE. The methods and findings resulted in recommendations being made to industry about sports journalism ethics.

#### **4.7 Ethical Considerations for the Research Project**

Ryen rightly notes that “knowledge production comes with a moral responsibility towards research participants” (2016: 42) and this research project was scrutinised and approved by the University of Gloucestershire’s Research Ethics Committee before interviewing and diary-collection was initiated in the field.

During the course of the research, careful and systematic steps were taken to gather informed consent from participants. It was possible that self-incriminating or damaging allegations could emerge during the course of interviews, so anonymity was provided for all interviewees, and they were made aware of this from the outset. Anonymisation was applied in the same way to participants who kept dairies. During the course of my autoethnographic research, news organisations and individuals were anonymised on the same basis. Throughout the project I was mindful of the need for the anonymisation not to compromise the weight and usefulness of the data, so it was only done where it was needed to preserve the anonymity of the participants and to prevent a legal issue arising with third parties mentioned in the data. This was done on a careful, case-by-case basis as data was gathered.

During the project I was also aware of a potential conflict of interest that could arise through the fact that I am both a teacher and a researcher of sports journalism ethics. If subsequent students were to read the thesis, or research outputs related to it, and disagree with the

decisions or judgments made in my autoethnographic section, then this could potentially undermine my standing as a lecturer. However, I believe I overcame this by ensuring from the outset of the research project that I adhered to the Independent Press Standards Organisation's Editors' Code of Practice on all journalistic assignments I conducted during the course of the research. Furthermore, detailed accounts of my moral reasoning are provided throughout the autoethnography.

A key ethical question prior to the data-gathering process was the extent to which written, informed consent should be sought for certain aspects of the research. Clearly, such consent was obtained for those journalists whom I interviewed and whom I requested to complete a diary. However, issues of consent around the autoethnographic part of the research were more complex. As part of the research, I attended matches, made phone calls and covered press conferences and other events as a working journalist. At these events, I was fulfilling commissions that I had been given as a freelance journalist but I was also, potentially, using ethical issues that arose at these events as sources of material or triggers for my autoethnographic log. As such, a form of observation was occurring. It would not have been practical (nor perhaps desirable, as it could have inhibited conduct) to gain the prior consent of every journalist or press officer attending a press conference, and to tell them there was the potential for me to use their words or actions as the basis of some reflection. This would have potentially impoverished the data. As has been argued, "to make written informed consent mandatory would mean the end of much 'street-style' ethnography" (Ryen, 2016: 33). However, it was still incumbent upon me to be mindful of how those media workers were treated as part of the writing-up process, not least in ensuring that there was no scope for any of them to feel there had been a breach of trust. Consequently, accounts of such events within the thesis – and the reflections upon them – were, where matters were deemed sensitive, written in such a way as to disguise the identity of the clubs and individuals involved, both those working for sports organisations and those working for sports news organisations. Alternatively, they were judiciously redacted.

There was the potential risk of defamation to people referred to by the participants. This risk of libel was minimised by me using my professional knowledge of media law to, when necessary, anonymise or redact the people or organisations referred to by participants or in

the autoethnographic reflections. As well as issues of civil law potentially arising, there was also the possibility of criminal law breaches coming to light. If evidence of criminal behaviour had emerged during the course of the research (for example, phone hacking), then the police would have been informed. This was made clear in the voluntary informed consent forms sent to participants.

## **4.8 Limitations and Challenges**

### *4.8.1 Halo Effect*

While participants in both the interviews and the diary-keeping were assured of confidentiality, some participants may – consciously or subconsciously – have aimed to achieve what is known as the ‘halo effect’ by providing answers and content that conform with socially acceptable answers (Hardin, Zhong and Whiteside, 2009). Or, given my role as a fellow sports journalist, they may have provided answers and content that aimed to impress me. I was cognisant of this during the project, and of the same issue potentially contaminating the autoethnography.

### *4.8.2 Epistemological Issues Around the Gathering of Data for Self-Censorship*

Self-censorship is a difficult phenomenon to quantify and analyse because its defining characteristic is an absence – namely, silence, or a withholding. Moreover, a person might be unaware that they are self-censoring. There was an awareness throughout the project that investigating self-censorship is an inherently difficult task, perhaps akin to asking someone to psychoanalyse themselves. Developing Breed (1960), Preston has suggested that self-censorship – which he conceptualises as a form of organisational power – is hidden from empirical study:

The insight that organisational power may be exercised informally and only periodically, implicitly rather than overtly, poses many challenges. It suggests that journalists learn and internalise the subtle rules and anticipate the boundaries of organisational policies and values. As a result, organisational power and influence may



be difficult to research when it is expressed in forms of self-censorship that are more effective than direct censorship. Clearly, these issues pose difficulties for research since empirical work focused on the visible, formal expressions of organisational power may be missing out on the real story – that centred around the informal exercise of power, such as self-censorship (Preston, 2009: 9)

It could be argued that the definition of self-censorship that is offered by Preston is too narrow, and that the analysis assumes too much organisational power at the expense of individual agency. As a researcher, there was a responsibility for me to ensure that questioning in interviews was sufficiently refined to elicit accounts of individual self-censorship by participants, and there was also a responsibility to ensure that diary-keeping participants were adequately briefed on what constitutes self-censorship.

#### *4.8.3 Dual Role: Researcher and Sports Journalist*

Reflexivity refers to the practice of a researcher considering “how his or her presence, standpoint, or characteristics might have influenced the outcome of the research process” (Wall, 2006: 3), and this was pertinent to this project due to my dual role as both an academic and sports journalist. How could my ‘insider’ status as a sports journalist hinder or help the research project? The key consideration to arise from this was the need for intellectual honesty throughout the project – a point that ties in with the concept of hermeneutic awareness developed above. A constant process of reflection was required, which acknowledged during the IPA interviews that “you ought to be frank with yourself... about the likely consequences of your preconceptions (the ‘fore-structure’ of your knowledge)” (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2012: 42). It would be self-deceiving and dishonest to suggest that my ‘insider’ status as a sports journalist did not heavily influence my fore-structure, and make IPA bracketing challenging; and, at times, during IPA interviews it seemed important for the elicitation of deep data for me to bring my own experiences to bear on the interview, albeit in a sensitive way.

The potential ‘power relationship’ between myself and my interviewees was also a significant consideration. Should I present myself as a fellow journalist or as an academic when

interviewing fellow sports journalists? On reflection, I thought this did not need an either/or answer. It was important to be transparent with my interviewees and not to try and hide or erase my journalistic background, not least because the majority had prior awareness of it anyway. I simply made it clear I was a sports journalist with an interest in academic research into the industry. As such, the dual identity potentially collapsed into one.

#### **4.9: Summary**

This chapter has sought to justify the use of specific qualitative methods to answer the project's research objectives, as well as articulating the thesis's Kantian critical realist and deontological underpinnings. A methodological synthesis of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and autoethnography (AE) has been propounded and defended. Potential tensions between IPA and AE have been considered, as have their shared roots and similarities. Their application to the four specific research objectives has been explored. Building on the methodology used in the thesis's exploratory case study, the sense in which the project is a piece of applied philosophy has also been articulated. The ethical and legal challenges that potentially confront the project have been considered and processes for their mitigation outlined. Potential limitations and challenges to the data-collection process and the project's overall integrity have also been considered. The outcome is a research project methodology which is honest about the tensions within in, but which also displays some methodological innovation.

## **Chapter 5 – Findings and Analysis**

### **5.1: Overview of Findings**

This chapter contains a detailed analysis of the data gathered for the research project, along with a discussion of the findings. To assist with mapping out the chapter, the findings with regard to each research objective can be distilled as follows. With regard to RO1 ('To understand the extent to which sports journalists self-censor and how this could compromise their journalistic activity') the findings are:

- Self-censorship is a seemingly widespread and at times insidious aspect to contemporary sports journalism practice, inhibiting the emergence of truth and honest opinion
- The reasons for self-censoring are varied, with 11 broad motivations for self-censorship identified in the IPA Interviews alone
- Self-censorship occurs in many ways: through the self-suppression of facts, through euphemistic expression, through certain questions going unasked, through the dilution or non-expression of honestly held views
- Social media has led to new – and arguably more complex – forms of self-censorship.

Social media's impact on self-censorship is illustrative of social media posing fresh ethical challenges for sports journalists. In connection with RO2 ('To identify and examine common ethical challenges experienced by British sports journalists in the course of their professional work in the modern digital media landscape'), some of the findings relate to social media while others are broader issues. The project has found that:

- There is marked and profound ambivalence among participants about the impact of social media on sports journalism and sports journalists
- Online abuse is widespread, and for some participants, online abuse – whether at them or to the subjects of their stories – is a quotidian experience

- Perhaps paradoxically, social media is viewed as facilitating the spread of inaccuracies, but is perceived by some as a potent driver of improved standards of accuracy due to journalists feeling that their work is under greater scrutiny than ever before
- Social media is seen by some sports journalists as a corrupting influence on the integrity of sports journalism, with large Twitter followings corrupting sports journalists by prompting them to make editorial judgements based on their followers' anticipated reaction
- Sports journalists' sense of their duties is multifarious and often individually and collectively incoherent, with some participants holding contradictory – or at least conflicting – notions of what their duties are. Some duties can, perhaps paradoxically, inhibit truth-telling
- There is a general insistence by participants that they have not broken the law or committed serious code breaches, and nor are they aware of colleagues having done so
- There are admissions of pockets of fabrication, as when one interviewee admits to publishing transfer stories which he knew were not true, and ghost-writing columns which were entirely made up and not signed off by the 'columnist'
- Despite most participants' firm insistence of not having broken the law or codes, some of their descriptions of particular incidents and working practices suggest that on occasion they have not accurately or truthfully represented stories, as when they have broadcast on-the-record comments despite knowing through off-the-record conversation that the interviewee does not hold those views
- Instances of poor behaviour by sports journalists to other sports journalists occur, ranging from uncivil behaviour at press opportunities and on digital group chats to physical violence in the press box.

The project's discoveries in connection with RO3 ('To explore the relevance and impact of codes of conduct on sports journalists' practice') can be captured as follows:

- If a code of conduct is a “collective conscience for a profession” (Keeble, 2009: 15), then UK sports journalists lack that collective conscience due to a lack of awareness, interest and engagement with codes
- Sports editors express far greater enthusiasm and knowledge of codes than other sports journalists
- There is a tendency among sports reporters to abdicate their individual responsibility by devolving upwards their compliance with codes onto more senior colleagues
- Sports journalists’ behaviour is informed or regulated as much by unwritten rules and ‘pack’ instinct as it is by formal codes or laws. There is a strong element of self-policing.

In an effort to capture a vivid sense of what it is to *be* a contemporary UK sports journalist, the project also has RO4: (‘To capture the lived professional experience of modern sports journalists in the UK in the digital era and the implications of this for sports journalists’ professional identity’). The findings with regard to RO4 are:

- Contemporary sports journalism is an emotionally demanding activity, with participants manifesting a gamut of emotions, both positive and negative, in the course of conveying their lived experience of working in the industry:
  - a. There is evidence of burnout and ennui among a minority of participants
  - b. Positive emotions towards the industry and a sense of fulfilment appear to be connected with having a clear sense of professional identity and with discharging those professional duties
- The binary distinction between a) ‘cheerleading’/‘fans with typewriters’ sports journalism and b) serious sports journalism is inadequate. A number of participants emphasise the need to embrace an element of fandom in their coverage. This is distinct from crude characterisations of ‘cheerleading’, and represents in some instances a form of adaptation to a new media ecosystem that has digital interactivity at its centre.

It is important to note that in the course of the research data also emerged with regard to the phone-hacking scandal at *The News of the World*. Three of the participants worked at the title in various capacities in the period leading up the phone-hacking scandal that led to the newspaper being shut. As such, a by-product of the investigation into the stated research objectives is data on the phone-hacking scandal. None of the participants involved with *NotW* said they had hacked phones or knew about the practice, although one stated that he would probably have hacked phones had he been aware of how to do so. This would have been done out of the pressure to land scoops.

Having mapped out the overall findings, the chapter will now provide a step-by-step discussion of each of the research method's findings, followed by a synthesis that unites the findings with the existing literature.

## **5.2 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Interviews**

The IPA takes each of the ten interviews separately, analyses them in isolation, and extracts the key themes from each one. In some, tensions emerge of which the interviewees themselves seem unaware. In one, a participant manifests behaviour and states views which indicate a deeply felt sense of professional anxiety and which could be symptomatic of a form of burnout. In others, types of activity which might to the outsider seem wearing or even depressing – such as the receiving of, or anticipation of, online abuse – are viewed as commonplace and a fact of journalistic life. The threads and themes from the ten individual IPA are then synthesised both with each other and the literature discussed in Chapter 3, so that differences, tensions and harmonies across the sample can be identified, as well as the data's resonance or otherwise with other writings in the field. The marked-up transcripts of each interview, the initial distillation of each individual IPA, and a document capturing the emergence of common themes is contained in Appendix 3.

### **5.2.1 Interviewee One – Alpha**

**“You're almost policing yourself all the time”**

A thread running through Alpha's interview is a determination not to be cowed in the pursuit of stories, but a frustration that such a resolute approach is not always shared by editors and other reporters. Sports desks, he maintains, can "almost abdicate responsibility" (p11) for controversial, hard stories (such as those around recreational drug use by sportspeople) to the news desk. Such abdication stems from sports desks "wanting to keep the relationship with the club cosy" (p11). The sense of professional frustration is a recurring motif. While emphasising his own desire to perform watchdog journalism and the "nitty-gritty" of sports news reporting, he is critical of others in the industry. There are sports journalists "who are more than happy to say 'I don't want anything to do with that, that's too tricky'" (p11). Alpha sees no dissonance between this hard-nosed approach to sports reporting and his acceptance of the 'fans with typewriters' sobriquet, a tag which he actually embraces: "I don't think it's an unmerited description. I consider myself a journalist, yes, but I'm also a fan with a laptop, and I find it hugely enjoyable to be able to watch live sport which I love doing anyway, and to write about it, it's fantastic, so... I don't always consider it as a job, I consider it more as a hobby I get paid for" (p10). For Alpha, openly admitting to being a fan and being a credible sports journalist are not mutually exclusive. The concept of ball-watching, discussed above, can be invoked as an analytic tool here. Alpha is content to be a literal ball-watcher for some of his professional life, but there are times when he focuses on harder news – taking his eye away from the literal ball to cover more serious matters.

There is a tension between Alpha's emphasis on doggedly pursuing hard news sports stories and his detailed account of how he self-censors. Self-censorship seems to exert a perpetual pull on his work: "You're almost policing yourself all the time as a journalist, you're censoring what you might or might not write," (p9) he says, elsewhere asserting in the context of potentially damaging relationships with contacts, "certain stories are best left alone" (p2). Elsewhere, however, he can be quite strident in stating his willingness to alienate contacts, saying that the ethical value of giving the public the truth trumps the relationship with the contact. Alpha says his first duty is to convey facts and this duty is bound up with his sense of what it is to be a sports journalist and their values. Reflecting on one story he published, he says: "To not report it, you wouldn't be doing your job. And, for me as a journalist, the job comes first and this contact wasn't someone that I'd lose any sleep over having a temporary falling out with" (p1). Rather breathlessly, he later states the ethical importance of sometimes

putting oneself on a collision course with a contact: “If you get a good story, if you’re a journalist who enjoys breaking stories, you’ve got the desire to do that then you’re willing to compromise a contact or a relationship with a contact for the sake of running that story that you know to be true, so you’re giving the readers that story, you’re beating your competitors and rivals to get the story out there first, albeit at the expense of a potential conflict with a contact. So I think that comes under the category of values in terms of having that drive and determination to always get the best stories as a journalist” (p4). So, the courage to ‘burn’ a contact is viewed as an important value for the sports journalist.

While there is a tension in Alpha’s thoughts around self-censorship and pursuing stories, he is clear that most of the issues of self-censorship he encounters are related to what he puts (or does not put) on social media: “I’m wary about what I put on social media. One for fear of upsetting people and getting a hostile reaction. And two for any potential fears of libel, defamation” (p7). With a sense of incredulity, Alpha says that what he posts on social media can trigger abuse not only online but in person: “I think you do have to be careful with Twitter, with what you put. I mean I’m always extremely careful... I’d post something work-related, maybe an article that I’d written, I’d post a link – hostile reaction. I remember once I posted an article... I’d put it on Twitter and there was a game later that day – and I actually got abused by fans at that game for reporting factually correct information. Which is absolutely ludicrous, isn’t it?” (p6).

The negative influence of social media hovers through much of the transcript, with Alpha evincing a steady sense of unease about it. The participant feels some sports journalists and media organisations use social media in pursuit of a bigger profile, “and that can lead to an exaggeration of stories and potential fake news” (p7). “Wannabe” sports journalists also populate social media. The growth of social media has “certainly spawned a generation of you could call them wannabe-journalists as opposed to *bona fide*, qualified, NCTJ [National Council for the Training of Journalists]-trained journalists”, which adds to the competition (p12).

On the codes that govern his working practice, Alpha emphasises the “unwritten rule” (p8) of the press pack rather than the formal Editors’ Code of Practice, the latter which he regards as



of negligible application to sports journalists. He recounts an example of a journalist who broke an embargo from a Premier League football press conference. The reaction from the press pack was swift and firm: “The response from the press pack, I’d say it was fierce and they were very high-profile journalists, football reporters, who were seriously giving it to this guy on Twitter.” The reporter’s fate, he says, was a form of professional ostracism: “You’re screwing over your peers but you’ve almost screwed yourself over because you lose all respect” (p8). For Alpha, it seems self-policing is the primary form of media regulation of and by sports journalists.

### **5.2.2 Interviewee Two – Beta**

**“They (reporters) don’t want to be clutching a fig leaf while their competitors have got a full Saville Row suit”**

Beta emphasises instinct as a source of guidance in his day-to-day practice. Through experience, he suggests that he often knows instinctively what is on the record/off the record: “I know, without almost having to ask, what you can put in, what it would be best to leave out for the subject’s, for his or her good, you know. Yeah, I don’t know, I mean I spoke to someone the other day and a number of very interesting, potentially explosive, sort of quotes. We always discuss on the record and off the record but in this particular case I knew the bloke well enough that I don’t have to. You know, I would know what you could use and what you couldn’t use. Now maybe that would be different if you were a younger reporter” (p1). This suggests that on Beta’s understanding years of contact-building, reporting on the ground, and nurturing trust leads to an acquired sense of what is fair. However, it is possibly the case that such ‘instinct’ is actually a shorthand for Beta subconsciously preserving his relationships with contacts. However, he does explain why he does not always publish the compelling quotes he gets: “It’s got to be in the public interest, frankly, to get in the paper, it’s got to be accurate and not just somebody’s hearsay” (p8). Consonant with this, Beta elsewhere espouses the traditional ethical view of facts having supremacy over opinions: “‘Comment is free facts are sacred,’ which is C.P. Scott, and I think that for me is the guiding one, truth” (p1).

While instinct is important, formal codes are not. Beta is unsure whether his title is signed up to either IPSO or IMPRESS (“it’s like the darts, or the snooker or the boxing, isn’t it, there are different bodies depending on who you want to sort of align yourself to” (p4)). This ignorance is cheerfully volunteered. Codes of practice are something to concern his editors and the sports desk, with it only affecting him “by osmosis” (p3) (a term which, it should be noted, was also used by Breed (1960) in his seminal study into journalism values). Yet Beta is supportive of their being a code of practice: “I think if there’s nothing it’s just the Wild West, it’s a free-for-all. I would say there’s definitely a need for a code” (p4). Beta appreciates the idea of a code in theory but is unclear on the practicalities, which generates a sense of vagueness about his thinking on codes; a code is a good thing to have in the background, but of limited application in his particular case.

There is an acceptance by Beta that some reporters will be more ruthless than others, and an insistence that ruthlessness does not necessarily constitute unethical behaviour. He is unaware of any illegal behaviour by sports journalists, although some colleagues have “fewer scruples” in terms of their news-gathering techniques: “They might be more ruthless, they might have fewer scruples in terms of what appears in the paper and upsetting people and you know have a thicker skin, but ummm having a thick skin isn’t illegal” (p7).

Beta speaks powerfully and articulately about the different types of pressure that can be felt by a reporter covering a particular beat. Through pressure exerted by editors, Beta suggests a “rule of fear” can “warp” the way tabloid sports reporters cover stories. While this was more the case in the past – when he says it led to mental breakdowns – than it is now “there are still pockets of it” (p3). Pressure is also something that is generated by being within the pack of sports reporters and not wanting to be scooped: “Primarily the pressure is that people don’t want to miss out, they don’t want to be left behind, they don’t want to be clutching a fig leaf while their competitors have got a full Saville Row suit” (p4). Beta speaks in the third person as though this is something that happens to others rather than to him, and there are no signs in the transcript that he himself is operating out of fear.

Social media is a double-edged sword when it comes to accuracy, according to Beta. Indeed, ambivalence characterises much of his thinking about social media. He believes social media

leads to unfair or unprofessional reporting being called out: “So I think more attention is given to inaccurate stories these days” (p3). But while social media can facilitate sports journalists being held to account more effectively, “perversely there are many more inaccurate stories around, whose provenance you’re not quite sure about” (p3).

The sense emerges that Twitter contains a number of perils, including time-wasting disputes and the temptation to try and deliver rolling news in one’s field: “I think we should be very wary, all of us, there’s no point trying to become a one-man news agency. I think that’s a mistake... You won’t write as well if you’re spending the whole time looking at the screen and getting into spats with other people... perhaps people aren’t doing themselves or their colleagues any justice if they’re just tweeting 24/7 around the clock trying to, you know, writing 138 stories, you know, for free essentially, erm, it’s sort of in a way undermining the whole fabric of paid journalism, potentially” (p6). Conversely, the growth of digital and social media has led to a higher reach and higher profile for his and others’ material (p11). It has also led to a huge increase in workload, particularly when covering a major tour: “Certainly touring, your workload is, you know, three or four times what it was” (p12).

Clubs’ use of social media is something that evidently alarms Beta. Clubs are harnessing social media to their benefit, and concomitantly seeking to silence critical voices and reduce journalists’ access: “Access certainly to a leading side is getting less and less, umm, and more and more sanitised... I think clubs want, they want hermetically sealed, they want it all on social media or Man United TV, or whatever it might be. They want it all in-house and no dissenting voices. Because, you know, they’ve seen what social media can do for certain other people, pop stars or something, and they want the same” (p9).

Beta abhors the notion of sports journalists as ‘fans with typewriters’ but immediately goes on to state that it is possible to be swept up in the emotion of a match, momentarily surrender neutrality, and still discharge one’s journalistic responsibilities. He gives a vivid instance: “I remember banging the desk when they scored their fourth try or whatever it was with just a minute to go. Incredible, incredible story. You know, and you know that wasn’t neutral. But I’m an Englishman and they were beating an English club, you know, and it was, you know, it wasn’t supporting one team. It was the, you know, you can occasionally get swept up in the,

in the sheer excitement of the occasion... But hopefully, you know, you have to bury that fairly quickly and write, tap out 800 half-decent words” (p10). There is an air of paradox to this, and certainly enough to suggest that ‘fans with typewriters’ is a deceptively complex term.

The idea emerges of the participant regarding sports journalism as an increasingly diverse activity in the digital age, with the essential characteristics depending on one’s focus: “There’s all sorts of different ways to swing the cat. I wouldn't presume to say one is better than the other. I think in that sense, you know, there are more, slightly more avenues, you can do different things and specialise” (p15). However, there are fewer openings for reflective, finely-crafted prose due to digital demands: “There’s probably less room for essayists if you like, the sort of – what am I trying to say? – rambling, ‘leafy lane’ journalism... I would love to sit and write nice essays about cricket and football and rugby or whatever it might be, you know, go off the beaten track; those opportunities are fewer now, without question, because of the imperatives of web audiences and clicks” (p15). There is an undertow of nostalgia here.

### **5.2.3 Interviewee Three – Gamma**

#### **“Before you were untouchable... You’re sort of right out there now to be shot at”**

Anticipating what the fans want, putting oneself in fans’ shoes, and providing an insight into what the fans are talking about is a thread that runs through Gamma’s interview. Gamma sees his first duty as towards the fans: “I think the biggest, the person that I feel like I’m representing is, is the supporters... So you’re there almost now to be the fan that wants to find out what’s really going on, address issues at the club... I think I’ve a responsibility to fans to uncover the issues that they feel are important” (p3). Later, again: “So I always think is it in the fans’ interests to know what’s going on? If yes, which it normally is, do the story” (p14). However, the sense emerges that while it’s important to be *of* the fans, it is important not to be *a* fan: “You still have to be seen as the reliable source, umm, not somebody who’s going to be carried away by their emotions when they’re reporting on something, not somebody who’s going to act like a fan” (p2). “Fan”, apparently a simple concept, is a complicated one for Gamma to negotiate. Later, he elaborates, saying that interactivity in the digital age has changed his sense of what his role is, with him now tailoring his content to what social media

indicates are the fans' big concerns. Fan-led content is the concept he invokes: "The main impact has been the interactive side of it, I think, for me. So 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're almost, you can create a lot of content just on fan opinion and what fans are talking about; what's the burning issue, what's the... It's almost like the trending topics about the club you're covering and what you need to go and do more, tailor your content towards that... you're expected to produce page views on day one. The best way to do that is interactive fan-led content and engage with people. So you're the sort of hub of all that, all that chat and all that debate and all those issues" (p19). In the digital age, a key role of the patch reporter for Gamma is to facilitate debate about the topics that fans are discussing on social media.

Gamma thinks deeply and carefully about how to use delicate information given to him by sources, but states too that worrying too much about people's reactions is likely to limit a sports journalist's success: "But it is a constant balancing act between using your contacts, protecting your contacts, never revealing your sources – which is what my policy is – and getting the job done. You know, there is a lot of pressure to get people to read your stuff. I think if you spend too much time tiptoeing around trying not to upset anybody then I don't think you'll be that successful" (p1). Balancing what information to use/not use from sources equates to a constant state of "self-editing": "I think you're almost constantly semi-self-editing stuff or weighing up whether you need to do something" (p15).

Gamma makes it explicit that social media has altered the nature of his job, but that it brings dangers. In particular, the pace at which Twitter operates poses the risk of things being done with dangerous haste: "If you're using your own Twitter account as a first port of call for a lot of your readers I think you need to be more careful. You could easily put something that you regret on there in a split second, whereas I think you're very unlikely to do that in a story, certainly a newspaper story or even an online story, you have more time to think about it and draw breath whereas with Twitter everything's so instant that somebody can say something to you and you can just snap. I think that's an ethical issue because it's so instant and suddenly thousands of people are going to see it. Even if you delete it pretty much straight away it's

out there, it's going to be screenshotted" (p10). While an important tool for the sports journalist, Twitter hovers as a dangerous presence that can potentially inflict self-harm.

Tying in with the reflective tone that is characteristic of the interview, Gamma adopts a cautious, "self-editing" approach to Twitter to ensure his professional credibility is unharmed: "I think I've always managed to I think sort of self-edit my Twitter and I think for that reason I think I've got a good Twitter following that will believe what I say, because I can't think of any examples where I've had to backtrack or delete or get involved in any silly spats" (p10). This self-editing on Twitter is viewed as the digital equivalent of not behaving like an emotional fan in the press box: "I think it's sort of comparable to if you're a fan of a team and you're reporting a game, you don't stand up in the press box and start shouting and screaming when a goal goes in. I think it's a bit like that. With Twitter you can't act like an emotional fan. You've got to be passionate about it and you've got to reflect the fans' views but I don't think you can behave like a fan. You can't, err, you have to have some restraint there. There's a line as a journalist between... you know, and I think it's similar to journalists celebrating in press boxes, which I'm very anti. And it's a bit like that on Twitter as well" (p11). This is a digital transposition of the 'no cheering in the press box' adage.

Self-editing occurs in other ways for Gamma. Self-censorship in opinion writing, for example, comes through the scrupulous selection of words. Gamma says: "It's probably a choice of language and not ever letting anything get personal. So it's always trying to find the right words to make your opinion clear without severing ties, although you know at times there's going to be friction" (p15).

Codes of conduct are peripheral to Gamma's practice, and seem almost something that he aims to push up against. He sees media law as setting the limits of his journalistic practice, not codes. While stating that it is "worth" having the guidelines contained in the Editors' Code of Practice, they would appear redundant in his approach: "I think it almost boils down to the law now. Media law, umm, rather than less formal guidelines, I think that's... It's almost, you can push it as far as you want as long as you're not breaking the law, as long as there's no legal issue... I think it's, it's worth having as guidelines but I think there will be times when you

really have to push the boundaries of them” (p7). As such, regulatory codes seem, in practice, effectively superfluous to Gamma.

As clubs produce more in-house content, Gamma sees himself as having new competition: “I think the competition’s changed from being rival newspapers to being media against club media, offering something different” (p4). Moreover, the carefully-guarded access to Premier League football clubs means that the truth is hard to get to, with many top-flight football reporters effectively backing off from trying to fulfil a watchdog function because they are put at such distance from clubs by the clubs themselves: “I think Premier League reporters have almost given up on that now, because they’ve been so pushed away from it. They are so restricted, it’s so controlled, it’s, umm... I think the higher up you go – obviously the vast majority of my experience is in football – 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, 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” (p17). There is a seam of pessimistic resignation here.

The sense emerges of audience metrics being a backdrop to Gamma’s working life, with digital data prompting “ruthless” decisions about what content is cut, such as grassroots sports, women’s sport and youth sport. There is no scope for holding on to certain sports for “nostalgic” reasons: “It’s there every day in our newsroom on the screen. Every day the long tail of content is analysed – why are you spending time doing stories that are only being read by a couple of hundred people? You can’t do that anymore. You need to do more of that, less of that, spend more time on that... there’s a lot more awareness of what performs well and we’ve been ruthless I think with digital, a lot of stuff that we now know we were only hanging onto for nostalgic reasons has just gone now – partly due to, you know, staffing levels, partly due to it just wasn’t justifying the time being spent on it anyway” (p20). Coverage of certain sports that are considered mainstream but which don’t yield strong metrics have also been dropped, such as horse racing, triggering mixed feelings in the participant: “I feel very torn as I feel like we’re letting down the local sport community” (p21). Metrics also put added stress on journalists, with their page views there for all to see in the newsroom: “You know there’s a lot of pressure, a lot of journalists struggle with it” (p25). A pensive interviewee, this is the

most emotional language (“letting down”; “very torn”) Gamma used when considering changes to the industry.

It is now part of the football reporter’s role to receive some abuse online, says Gamma: “Obviously the less abuse you get the better but you’ve got to accept that you’re going to get some at some point. Before you were untouchable, you were just working for a newspaper and nobody really could – I suppose they could write you a letter but often they wouldn’t even have known your name. You’re sort of right out there now to be shot at if you, if you make a bad judgment call” (p26). Gamma gives a vivid example of how one poor decision by a colleague led to a badly damaged reputation through social media: “He did a hit-or-miss January signings feature on footballers and he gave ‘miss’ to a footballer who had just recovered from cancer. And this was just supposed to be a bit of fun but he got so much abuse for it online that it almost finished him off in terms of reputation... I think you are under scrutiny all the time.” (p25-26). Abuse and scrutiny seem to be overlapping concepts in Gamma’s mind.

#### **5.2.4 Interviewee Four – Delta**

**“That’s what I always look at whenever we’re promoting anything online. Is that going to invite a lot of abuse?”**

Evident in Delta’s interview is a keen awareness of the power of social media to be a conduit for abuse. Many of her answers touch on this. The complexities of what to post and what not to post on social media is a thread that runs through her interview. In particular, this issue arises when there is a story that it is felt will go down well with the online audience but which is in some way critical of an individual: “When you know you’ve got something which will do really well in terms of numbers and people will share, engage with and enjoy but it is almost knocking someone that’s another problem that we have, especially with social media. You really have to tread that line quite carefully because you don’t want to open people up to personal exposure, personal ridicule, because that’s not fair” (p3). Journalists running the BBC’s social media accounts therefore need to be careful about who they tag or @-mention in posts. She gives a powerful example involving Mo Farah, the distance runner: “It’s such a



simple thing to tag another athlete or something into a post but we have a 22 million audience, so if you – if they're directing any sort of abuse at the BBC that's fine because we're just a person sat behind a screen... There had been a black and ethnic minority awards, and Mo Farah and I can't remember who else won, but Mo Farah was one of them and we put "congratulations" and tagged Mo Farah in it, and the abuse that was then directed to his Twitter account – because he was tagged in it so people could, you know – all sorts of horrendous stuff, that we just had to take it down because we don't want to inflict that on someone" (p3). It would appear from her answers that consideration of what will trigger abuse is a commonplace activity: "I think you've just got to be a bit careful not to invite singular abuse to one person, that's what I always look at whenever we're promoting anything online. Is that going to invite a lot of abuse?" (p4). Delta gives no indication of finding this wearing, but rather it is simply a quotidian part of her role.

Delta initially states that she believes a sports journalist's primary responsibility is to their audience: "I think we have a duty to the audience to tell stories, first of all" (p3). However, later on – tying in with the point explored in the previous paragraph – she suggests the primary duty is to the athletes who are covered: "But I think the main one is having the duty to individual humans that we're telling the stories of, because you don't know how people are going to react and you don't know how, you know, well or how far and wide this is going to be shared so I think you do always have to think of that" (p3). There is a potential contradiction here, which Delta does not identify. Does that sense of duty to athletes trump the "duty to the audience to tell stories, first of all"? It seems the unpredictable impact of sharing content via social media has made some journalists' sense of a duty of care towards an article's subject stronger. This could potentially have a chilling effect, prompting certain content to go unpublished.

The participant stresses that the audience, through social media, hold the BBC to account in terms of the accuracy and balance of their reporting (p5). Anything sensationalised is called out by the audience. In terms of maintaining accuracy, Delta says issues of verification and fake news are time-consuming for BBC Sport (p10).

Delta says she is not aware of any illegal behaviour having been committed by sports journalists, and on the issue of guidelines she gives the sense that it is habit – socialisation – that creates a sense of values within the BBC. Knowing what the limits are for the BBC is almost instinctive for her: “It’s just a natural thing – you just know what your boundaries are a lot of the time from working there for so many years” (p5). There is also a sense of being protected by “the hierarchy” and of trusting her superiors, to an extent that the responsibility of complying with the guidelines can be devolved onto them: “Especially in the BBC there’s a good hierarchy so... that alleviates any of the, you know, danger in terms of stepping outside the guidelines... The people who are on the grades above you have been there longer so you trust that they know the Editorial Guidelines even more than you do, therefore you’re trusting their decisions” (p6). The clear sense comes through of the corporation’s hierarchy providing a kind of comfort blanket or safety net, to the extent that Delta conveys a low sense of concern at breaching the code herself. Ethical compliance is in a sense ‘delegated up’.

There is another strand to Delta’s thinking on the BBC’s Editorial Guidelines. The guidelines also serve to distinguish the BBC’s *bona fide* journalism from citizen journalists. So, the code functions as a means of defining the journalist’s professional status, and also reinforcing the BBC’s brand and reputation for reliability: “You’ve got all sorts of people contributing to sports journalism who have no code, I mean bloggers and fan sites and you think about message boards and things like that, you know, they can do whatever the hell they want and essentially have no consequences and I think people come to the BBC because they know it’s a trusted source. That is the one crucial thing that we will always have, hopefully, umm, and therefore I think the guidelines have to be in place for that reason. Sometimes they can be frustrating but you know that they’re there for a reason, they’re not just made and someone’s gone, oh yeah, we’ll just do it like that. They’re there for a reason and they’re there to protect us and to protect our brand if you like, because people come to us because we’re trusted” (p6). In a sense the guidelines, while sometimes “frustrating”, are more important than they ever have been to Delta, as they serve to shore up the BBC brand and, indirectly, her own and colleagues’ professional status.

In the quest to attract and retain a younger audience, Delta refers to the sense of at times trying to cater for two different audiences. The traditional sports news (older audience) is

alongside the sportainment (younger audience). Delta gives the sense of groping towards an approach that satisfies both: “It’s almost like two different audiences sometimes. So it kind of feels like you’ll do certain stories – I don’t know, all the problems that they’ve been having with the Qatar World Cup – you know, to me, I don’t particularly find that interesting. It’s a bit dry but it’s important news... and we shouldn’t ignore it. But also we’re writing about, umm, a man dressing up as a fridge to be West Brom’s mascot... I think we’re just trying to combine both and we’ll let news stories be news stories because that’s what they are, almost you kind of think, well, if younger people read them then brilliant, but they’re probably not going to because they’re longer and they’re harder to consume and they’re a bit more gritty. But also we need to balance it with fun stuff, entertainment, and engaging quizzes and things like that... so we’re trying to have fun stories but not write them like we’re teenagers” (p7-8). At this point, the tension of appealing to a younger demographic while maintaining BBC values is apparent, but not one that causes a notable sense of professional difficulty for Delta. Later, however, a sense emerges of the difficulties that trying to attract a younger audience have engendered, with some people uncomfortable at the BBC’s use of a different voice: “You don’t want to be the dad at the disco. That’s how we always say it, you know, you don’t want to be a 40-year-old man talking the language of a teenager because it just doesn’t work, and I think sometimes that’s what people think we’re guilty of, is just trying to be young and hip, and that’s not what we’re trying to do, we’re just trying to engage with a different audience away from our core audience and I think people do struggle with that sometimes” (p16).

Disagreement within BBC Sport about whether something is clickbait is common, states Delta: “There’s a fine balance between getting people back to your website through social media channels by putting a bit of mystery in a post and pure unadulterated clickbait, which is what other outlets tend to do, umm, the LADbibles of this world. We want a bit of that because there’s a reason why they do it – ‘cos it gets them loads of hits – but we also need to make sure we’re not so, I guess, overt in doing it because people expect better of the BBC... It takes a bit of work sometimes, and actually a lot of the time we disagree... ‘Well I think that’s clickbait’, ‘Well I don’t think that is’” (p9). The wording here is curious: not being “overt”. The implication is that some promotional social media content published by the BBC is covertly clickbait; and that as long as most of the audience does not regard it is clickbait, then that is acceptable.

Delivering original football coverage on social media can be difficult, says Delta, due to clubs jealously guarding ideas and limiting access: “I think specifically in terms of the social media world, a lot of the clubs now want to keep it in-house. So any big ideas that we have they’re like ‘Oh no, no, no, you can’t do that because we’re going to do that on our channels. We want to do it, we want to take sole ownership.’ They’re almost like becoming, err, a news outlet themselves for doing, you know, videos and it’s when they brand things ‘exclusive’ – it’s not an exclusive because it’s your own club, you can’t do that! [Laughs] That always really bugs me” (p12). What emerges is Delta’s sense that it is clubs themselves that are now rivals to the BBC, and that beneath the laughter there is frustration.

Delta is explicit about how much resource is put into social media by BBC Sport and how she believes it will continue to grow. Social media is making a profound change in her working life as a sports journalist. On occasions, BBC Sport now has more social media staff on shift than sports writers: “(Social media has) turned into this massive beast... our social media team is as big as our news desk team now. We’ve got six or seven assistant producers, three producers and an editor – and that’s our social media team... we’ll sometimes have more social media people in than writers, which seems mad but actually we’re constantly churning, you know, it’s a different pace I think... So it has become such a massive part of everything we do and sometimes we make editorial judgements, you know, based on, you know, will this do well on social media? Will this appeal to our social media audience?... it’s only going to get bigger I think as well” (p14). Delta offers a sustained, detailed insight into the trajectory of social media at the BBC, and what emerges is a sense of the corporation investing large resources into social as a means of capturing a younger audience that will sustain it into the future, although there are tensions around how to attract that audience while not alienating the established, older one.

### **5.2.5 Interviewee 5 – Epsilon**

**“I like being on that treadmill – it’s not a bad place to be.”**

Thrown into sharp relief by Epsilon is the contrasting views expressed by professional sports people when the voice recorder is running and when it is not. While admitting knowledge of something off the record, the opposite is then said once the broadcast interview is on the record. On the topic of a cheating incident, for example, she says: “I’m sure any [REDACTED] journalist who’s been around players before and (they’ve) said ‘Oh yeah, so-and-so used to do that all the time,’ or ‘So-and-so used to do this,’ and ‘So-and-so used to do that.’ But as soon as a microphone’s put under their face they’d be like, ‘Well I never heard what went on. It never happened when I was involved. I heard about it but I was never involved.’ And sort of so many senior, big names in the game all of a sudden knew nothing about it because it had never happened to them, whereas behind closed doors everyone’s like, ‘Yeah, it was going on everywhere.’ So that’s very difficult to report as a journalist. You have to say that – you know, why is it so many of these senior players know nothing about something that is apparently so prolific?” (p2). The contrast between what is said on the record and what is said off it is so sharp that it would seem fair to conclude that, in this incident at least, sports journalists run the risk of abetting the publication of content that they know is not the honestly held view of the interviewee, and therefore inaccurate.

On the issue of a sports journalist’s duties, Epsilon puts emphasis on the sports news being done for a universal audience, not a niche sports one: “Your duty is to report the news of sport. Who’s interested in the news of sport? I’d always argue everyone... you’re reporting on it for everyone” (p3). The participant also voices a sense of obligation – a need to “look after” – the people she’s reporting on. There is no sense of her being aware of this potentially being in conflict with her previously stated duty of “reporting the news of sport”. She states: “You have to make sure that you are looking after them” (p3). Although she does not use the term, this duty can result in self-censorship – of not running content even when it is initially given on the record. She provides an example: “He (a national coach) brought up voluntarily the troubles they’d had in the build up to that event and mentioned a player being in a car crash. And I was like, hang on. I’ve been told not to mention it throughout this whole tournament and then he starts spilling his guts to me in this last interview. So I said to him, I said in my last question, ‘You’ve just told me the player was in a car crash in the build-up to this event, can you please give us any more detail about what happened?’ To which he then shut down and realised he’d made a mistake. And so what we did was stop the interview there and I spoke

about it, I said, 'Look, I wouldn't have brought that up but you mentioned it.' And he said, 'I'm really sorry, I shouldn't have mentioned it, can we scrap the last question?' And I said, 'Fine.' So what we did was we made an agreement, I was doing it for TV and radio at the time, it wasn't live. We just chopped off the last question. I had a duty to him because he shouldn't have mentioned it, and ultimately to the player who, as I said, has had issues. And it's a, you know, medically sensitive issue. So, yeah, you, you, it doesn't matter who you're speaking to, you've got to look after them" (p4). The limits to "looking after" the subject of a story are not clearly demarcated, and the hierarchy of duties unclear.

Soon after, Epsilon asserts that "reporting the truth is the first thing" (p5) when naming the essential ethical qualities that a sports journalist should have. This is in tension with some of the points she has made previously, which detail scenarios where the whole truth is not conveyed. The practicalities of broadcast sports journalism seem at times in conflict with principles.

Epsilon initially conveys a certain wariness on expanding on the importance of the BBC's Editorial Guidelines: "Umm, they're written on my badge, if you ever forget. They are always there. If you've got one, have a read of the back – so they are always there. We are reminded of them on a reasonably regular basis. Umm, yeah, I mean..." (p7). Later on, however, she vigorously asserts her belief that the BBC should be held to a higher standard than other outlets due to the manner in which it is funded: "Yeah, definitely. Five hundred per cent" (p11). Later, the sense of public duty, aligned to the BBC's values, is forcefully stated: "You should be honest, umm, and you should try and serve the public interest. Umm, I can say that as a BBC journalist because that it what I'm there to report. Other media outlets might feel differently about the content they're producing, but that's what I produce every day. I'm not there to produce gossip, I'm there to produce stories that people need to hear, and that's my attitude going to work every day" (p18). She is not aware of any illegal behaviour by sports journalists (p12).

Epsilon gives examples of fellow sports journalists behaving poorly towards her. She expresses frustration at the obstruction and "mean" behaviour displayed by non-broadcast journalists when she is trying to gather post-match interviews: "If they think your camera is

anywhere near a player they're speaking to they will elbow you, push you, they'll happily turn the camera away, hold their notebooks up in front of the camera... there are no rules in a mixed zone" (p6). She also conveys frustration at the self-declared embargoing of post-match interviews by "protective" journalists, many of whom she says are senior reporters (p6). Fellow broadcasters also behave poorly as they aggressively seek the best sites for camera angles (p7). Later, she provides an example of how a newspaper made her the subject of a story which she believes was clickbait and an exemplar of lazy journalism. The story claimed that she had been trolled. This, she says, was the opposite of her experience: "A newspaper decided to write the story that I had been trolled online and people didn't like what I had done, which I found a very interesting story because my experience [REDACTED] [REDACTED] was an incredible amount of positivity, people who engaged who otherwise hadn't been interested in the sport... That's poor and lazy journalism... if you want to know how lazy the journalism was – exactly the same story was published the year after. Same headline, same picture, different tweets. I mean, it was very amusing" (p18-19). Besides stated amusement, there is an undertow of understandable frustration.

The importance of gathering footage that is more suited for a younger, social media-focused demographic is emphasised (p9), but Epsilon says her own use of social media is non-interactive. She uses social platforms to point followers to links and content: "I don't use it to have conversations with people" (p19).

While Epsilon says she would dearly like to have more time to investigate stories, she says time is limited for "original journalism" (p8). Her frustrations at not being able to source original stories surface again later on: "I'd love to have more time to do actual, real stuff... these stories do come out in the wash eventually and there are people who are watching closely. Am I watching closely right now? No. I've read you a breakfast bulletin at 6.28 this morning and I think I've got to do a live at [REDACTED] tomorrow" (p15). However, the cycle of press calls and routine coverage is at times something she expresses a fondness for: "I mean, yeah, it is a bit of a treadmill at times but I'm not going to complain about it, I like being on that treadmill – it's not a bad place to be" (p17). There is therefore something of a tension between Epsilon's desire to be off the treadmill to gather "real stuff" but the reassuring familiarity of the daily diary-based treadmill.

## 5.2.6 Interviewee Six – Zeta

### **“Your life becomes the season”**

Running through Zeta’s transcript is a sense of what a fragile, sometimes tenuous, relationship sports journalism can have with the truth. He admits to having written transfer stories which he has known “probably won’t happen” and that he knows “three or four” freelancers who have deliberately fabricated stories out of financial desperation. Further, other sports journalists overlooked the falsehoods out of an appreciation of their peers’ financial need: “I think everyone sort of turns a bit of a blind eye because they just think ‘Well, you know, he’s got, he’s got to make ends meet’” (p2). Zeta later admits that he has ghost-written columns for big-name former players in which he has not received the player’s approval for the copy – what might be termed opinion fabrication. While the participant views these as “hard” things to do, he does not necessarily see them as wrong things to do: “I’ve written columns and through one reason and another – not through my own fault – the columnist never said a word of it, because maybe you just couldn’t get hold of them... it’s not because you’ve done anything wrong. So, for example, it might be Wales are playing a Test match on Saturday so you need to get [REDACTED] reaction, and [REDACTED] just not available, or [REDACTED] is not available. So what do you do? Well, you’ve got to get something, you know, they’re crying out for it. So you’ve just got to go with it and then you just give them a text and say, ‘Listen, this is what you’ve said’ and pray that they don’t come back to you and say, you know. You’ve got to... those are probably the hardest things you ever write because essentially you’re writing the words of someone else who didn’t say a word of it” (p19). Zeta views such scenarios as an editorial challenge rather than an ethical challenge. It seems that it is often basic practicalities that get in the way of truth: the urgency generated by an impending deadline, for instance, or in the example of the fabricating freelancers, the need to make a basic living.

However, elsewhere in the interview, and rather jarringly, Zeta emphasises the importance of journalistic “core values” and fact-checking. Verifying the authenticity of material and social media accounts now presents “major questions and major dilemmas” for sports journalists (p10), he says. Later, this is connected to the importance of sports journalists



continuing to exercise traditional values of accuracy and careful sourcing: “The core values remain always the same for journalists, possibly even more so now because we’re relying on social media more for our stories so you need to be more vigilant, all the usual checks, all the fact-checking as you’re writing” (p17).

Social media is generally viewed negatively by Zeta due to it, he believes, fostering sloppy journalistic habits. An increasing dependency on social media is making young sports journalists “lazier” and sedentary (p6). Later, he connects the rise of social media to plagiarism and churnalism (p9). Connectedly, the participant is vociferous on how online audience analytics – “scoreboards on the wall” – have led to a sharp decline in coverage of some sports. A strong sense of frustration emerges. There is shrinking coverage of sports such as athletics while big-name stars perceived as being good for hits receive increasing coverage. This occurs due to the pressure on journalists to get hits on their articles. Social media has, he believes, intensified this contraction of variety (p8).

Truth – or departures from it – emerges as a theme throughout the interview in various guises. Poor questioning by sports journalists can mean the truth does not emerge, with superficial content being produced instead. Zeta emphasises his frustration around this by swearing: “I think at press conferences now the questions are getting worse and worse. And that means the answers are getting blander and blander... So if you just ask those same questions that everyone else is expecting you’ll get... the superficial answer that doesn’t really get to the truth at all... if you only ask the very obvious question you won’t get to the truth, and every story will be the bloody same” (p5). There is at moments an uneasy blend in the transcript between an insistence on high standards and the honest description of the practical realities of sports journalism.

Codes of practice are viewed by the participant as “largely” irrelevant to sports journalists because the journalists’ content is “just not controversial enough”, although he acknowledges that the BBC’s Editorial Guidelines have registered with him since joining the corporation (p6). This strikes a dissonant note in that many of the themes that arise during the course of the interview are controversial (e.g the fabrication of stories, phone-hacking, the perils of social media on reporting). Relatedly, Zeta makes an interesting choice of word – “freedom” – when

describing the difference between working for an agency/newspaper versus the BBC: “One of the big differences now joining the BBC from an agency was when you write for newspapers and agencies you’re granted an element of slight... a little bit of freedom. And it’s often in the way you couch a story, you know, the way you word it” (p1). ‘Freedom’ here seems to mean something akin to ‘licence to frame a story in a certain way’.

The participant says that, while he did not know how to hack phones and was not aware of phone-hacking occurring on the sports team while he worked for *The News of the World*, he can conceive of himself of having hacked phones if he had possessed the know-how. This, he says, would have been driven by the pressure to land stories: “There’s pressure coming at you from above, from your editors, you know, you need to come up with stories, especially when you’re working for a big title like that, you know, you’re judged on, are you the sort of guy who finds stories?... Erm, if I knew how to tap phones.... Oh. Hand on heart, I can’t say that I wouldn’t have and I could easily see myself that I would have done it, just because you want to make a name for yourself, you want to find a story, err, if the culture is there, other people are doing it then, yeah, why not? And let’s face it, it wasn’t just *The News of the World* who were doing it, so. Umm, I can easily, easily understand how – why and how – journalists did that, yeah” (p10-11).

The close relationship between the issues of preserving contacts and self-censorship emerge in Zeta’s interview. The difficulty of balancing the writing of negative pieces with preserving relationships is referred to as an “emotional” dilemma rather than an ethical one: “It’s like how tough do you want to get on someone when you’ve followed them all year long and, err, you know you’re going to be dealing with them week in, week out?” (p3). Later, however, the participant says some journalists take their “duty of care” to subjects “too seriously”, leading to extensive self-censorship: “Journalists can get very protective over their contacts and their relationships and sometimes I think to the detriment then of not reporting the full news... I think sports journalists probably protect them too much and a lot – a lot – of stories never see the light of day simply because sports journalists don’t want to ruin their relationships. I think a lot, well, yeah, every week there’s stories that never come out because of something or other” (p12). This is another strand to Zeta’s transcript that connects to the issue of truth or its absence.

Relationships with club media teams is another factor which Zeta suggests can significantly influence the flow of information. He believes football clubs are more strident in their efforts to muffle sports journalists due to a changed power dynamic that favours the clubs. This can lead to “bullying” by clubs, which in turn requires increased resilience from journalists (p7-8). He later returns to the forcefulness of some press officers, with their being an underlying sense of adversarial interaction. The participant attributes mendacity to them, yet perceives them as a necessary evil to be negotiated: “Some press officers regard themselves as a barrier, like the guard dog at the gates... They just see their, they see their job as a barrier, they will lie, they will not tell you stuff, they’ll deliberately block you, turn down any requests without even taking the requests to the coach or to the staff. Umm, so managing them has become almost as important as managing any other contact in sport because of that reason, because they can help you so much and they can make your life really difficult” (p12-13).

Zeta says the cyclical, repetitive, diary-based nature of sports journalism (“your life becomes the season” (p14)) is what prompted him to switch to news journalism. Literal ball-watching eventually resulted in a state of professional ennui. The aspect of covering games week in, week out is part of the job’s fun but it can become a “treadmill”, and he admits to a form of what, given his vocabulary, might arguably be termed burnout: “If you ask crap questions you get crap answers, and I was probably just getting a bit fatigued with it all and not... You need to be up and ready and at it and enthusiastic and you need to be 100 per cent because it is a treadmill, you know, it is routine. You literally go from one week to the next to the next, plodding on through the games, through the games. It’s relentless, it is absolutely relentless... It’s great fun but it’s a real treadmill. And it’s a repetitive treadmill” (p15). There is also a hint of disillusion with sports reporters’ approach to news-gathering. Zeta views sports journalists as in many instances effectively scared of pursuing stories. Moreover, he believes many news journalists do not regard sports journalists as ‘journalists’ *per se*; an interesting view given that the participant had just moved over to the news desk after years working as a sports journalist: “Sports journalists will invariably duck out of a news story” (p13). It is a contemptuous view of sports journalists and at odds with much of the tenor of his reflections on his own work.

### 5.2.7 Interviewee Seven – Eta

**“If I was to say who’s pissed off the most people in the last decade of sports journalism... they’ve also delivered some of the very best sports journalism. So, you’re not in it to make friends, ultimately.”**

Eta says he did not hack phones while working for *The News of the World* but states that he felt some professional succour when it was revealed that colleagues had been, because it provided him with an explanation about why he had not been securing the magnitude of stories that colleagues had published (p1). He claims he would be “staggered” if phone hacking had not been used in connection with additional stories involving sports stars but admits he has “no evidence whatsoever” (p1). In the wake of the Leveson Inquiry, the participant believes sports journalists are more aware of codes of practice: “Post-Leveson it’s just more out there, you know, and I think certainly staff reporters are all briefed very clearly and expected and required to come in and listen to talks about codes of practice and what have you” (p9). With regard to criminality by sports journalists, Eta says there have been “rumours” of sports journalists on occasion using their inside information about teams to make money through betting (p11) but does not elaborate.

Vividly conveyed by Eta is the level of emotion that can be involved in sports journalism. He speaks excitedly of the “buzz” he got when told to write a front-page exclusive for [REDACTED] [REDACTED] (“He showed us these tapes... and I was absolutely, my heart was pounding, it was sort of pretty – I knew this was a massive story. And then the sports editor said, ‘You’ve got two hours. I need a thousand words. Make it the best fucking piece you’ve ever written in your life.’ And I was just like, bloody hell. That was a buzz, you know” (p13)) and also speaks about breaking down after finishing another story (“I remember a piece I wrote [REDACTED] [REDACTED], and I remember – this sounds pathetically dramatic – but I did, I think I wrote it and then burst into tears afterwards” (p17)). Not only is the level of emotion apparent, but it is the breadth of emotion too.

The notion of “going back to the same well time after time” is connected by Eta with the risk of bland content and (although not worded by him in this way) to self-censorship: “Working in sports journalism, you go back to the well, the same well, time after time after time, which is I think a major challenge of breaking big news stories as a sort of beat reporter... So you tread this constant tightrope between reporting what you know and what is interesting, and completely alienating yourself or alienating contacts or whatever” (p2). He sees his main duty as being that of reporting what he knows, although he acknowledges the fear of being “ostracised” can “compromise” this: “You’re there to pursue the truth, that’s why you should be there, and that should (be) kind of come what may, really. Erm, but clearly that’s, that’s not always as easy as it sounds and 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” (p3). When asked about the reasons for self-censorship, Eta indicates there can be a reluctance to criticise the sport one’s “grown up loving”, and that there can also be a wariness of alienating fellow sports journalists, who could “turn on you a bit” if articles are consistently negative: “You certainly don’t want to attack the sport that you’ve grown up loving so I guess there can be a temptation to sort of try and present a rosier image than it is... You’re gonna get a lot of pushback, whether it be from administrators, PR people, the individual themselves, or you get alienated, or your peer group, other journalists, start to turn on you a bit... Writing highly controversial stuff all the time is quite challenging because you get a lot of challenges that go with it” (p4). Despite a vehement criticism of cheering in the press box (described as “cringe-worthy” (p3)), the participant admits traces of fandom remain for a sports journalist and that these can feed into self-censorship: “There’s a sort of desire to protect the sport that you’re covering, a sort of blurred line between the fan and the journalist” (p4). Fear of legal action is also put forward as a reason (p9), although the participant later adds that some good sports journalists revel in the sense of being in the middle of the action: “When you start getting phone calls from lawyers your life becomes a lot more complicated... people don’t want stress in their lives all the time and, umm, so you steer from stuff which is going to cause that potentially. But, yeah, I think the best journalists should have a sort of doggedness and a willingness to, yeah, accept that that is part of the job sometimes and, you know, don’t get me wrong, I think a lot of good journalists and reporters get a little bit of a buzz out of it potentially because they want to feel like they’re in the thick of things” (p12).

Yet a sense of restlessness and a certain frustration with mainstream sports reporting practices permeate Eta's transcript. He is critical of what he terms a "quotes-based culture", in which usually anodyne quotes are incorporated into stories just because a coach or prominent player has said them, not because they are necessarily newsworthy lines. Further, he believes that sports journalists generally acknowledge this as being a superficial form of sports journalism that is "anathema" to "real" journalism but do little to challenge it: "I think that's a big problem, I really do, and the trouble is we all know it" (p15). For Eta, literal ball-watching is not enough; too much of that can lead to the journalistic eye being taken off more serious matters. Eta emphasises the importance of investigative work into topics which might not initially pique the interest of sports editors, and of the associated importance of "cage-rattling" (p5). Cage-rattling occurs later on in the interview too, with the participant emphasising the need to do this in order to fulfil one's mission as a sports journalist: "To write anything interesting or challenging – which is what we should all be striving to do – you're going to be writing stuff that's gonna rattle cages or, umm, upset people and that's, you know. If I was to say who's pissed off the most people in the last decade of sports journalism, you'd probably say David Walsh, Matt Lawton probably, umm, in recent times Lizzy [Ammon] with the cricket, you know. But they've also delivered some of the very best sports journalism. So, you're not in it to make friends, ultimately" (p18).

While repeating what could be termed a Walshian sense of duty to report what he knows to be true, the participant also mentions his sense of obligation to players. Reflecting on his campaigning work on ██████████, he says: "I've felt a duty perhaps to the players involved, who I didn't think were getting given enough of the counter-arguments to what the sport's doctors were telling them" (p6). The importance of regarding things from the player's perspective is made again later: "Essentially, I've tried to look at the game through a player's eyes a little bit more" (p8).

Eta is also concerned that the emphasis placed on speed of publication can compromise the truthfulness and thoroughness of content. The premium placed on speed narrows the number of sources that are consulted and therefore undermines the depth of the journalism, and can also prepare the way for the spread of misinformation: "I think that demand for speed

all the time... there's much less of an opportunity for people to take their time to actually delve really deep into issues and go to multiple sources and speak off the record to people and kind of gather the big picture – paint the whole picture rather than little, small bits of it. And, umm, yeah, I think that time pressure is massively responsible for, in a negative way, towards, err... I guess the proliferation of fake news... I'm not sure too many journalists would tell you that the online world has improved their ability to deliver a good, thoroughly researched story" (p11).

Ambivalence is voiced at the interactivity fostered by social media, with Eta singling out football journalists as bearing the brunt of "vitriol": "Things like social media have completely changed the relationship between journalists and readers, for the better and for the worse. There are some really good interactions on social media, there are some pretty ordinary ones as well" (p10). Social media, and digital media more generally, are not regarded by Eta as stimulants to better sports journalism.

Eta mentions the increasing tendency of sports clubs and bodies to "take ownership" of content through their own platforms, and simultaneously restrict access to independent journalists. This, he suggests with some concern, impoverishes the quality of content for fans: "What's interesting is the way that sports organisations are taking ownership of content and understanding how they can control content more and essentially, you know, like a club's website is their own media platform and I think there's an increasing and worrying trend towards limiting access towards, let's say, independent journalists, umm, who aren't bound by the constraints of PR controls and whatever, and just delivering content immediately to consumers" (p17). A new form of competition for sports journalists is therefore well-developed: the clubs themselves.

#### **5.2.8 Interviewee Eight – Theta**

**"But whenever I press that button, and this I think is a personal challenge, a real personal challenge I've had with the digital age, I have to be absolutely happy that what I've sent over is the best I could do."**

The predominant theme in Theta's answers is his sense of the digital age putting him under greater scrutiny, and that such scrutiny has helped increase the calibre of journalism: "I think there's that greater awareness now, whether it's subconscious or not, that whatever you're writing through the digital era, it's visible to far more people, and there's a chance for people to interact through that in a way that there probably wasn't previously" (p1). Later, he links the point explicitly to social media, saying social media has brought increased visibility and interaction, and with it increased scrutiny: "Everyone sees what I produce, you know, if they want to... ██████████ put it on Twitter and everyone can comment on what you've done during that day. And that's something that's come with the digital age, and I think that leads me personally to think, 'I want to make sure that everything is absolutely right on that article'... I always took 100 per cent pride in what I do, whether that's journalism or anything else. But, I want to be sure that everything's right because I know it's going to be scrutinised by, you know, anyone and everyone" (p2). He admits he is "very conscious" of how Twitter will respond to what he posts: "You put something on Twitter, you're very conscious of the reaction... I do feel that's quite a game-changer" (p3). Later, he explicitly states that he believes social media has raised the standard of sports reporters' work: "So I'm always conscious, thinking, 'This is going to be scrutinised to the nth degree and I want to make sure that I've covered every base.' And I think social media's been good for that, I think generally for journalism. I'd like to think it's raised the standard" (p11). However, he immediately follows that up by stating social media's downsides: "Because of the pressure, the immediacy of trying to break stories, it's made people – some journalists, I think – cut corners and put things up before they should have done. Not always because it's the journalist's fault, it's the editors'" (p11). There is a certain ambivalence, then, about social media, an ambivalence which runs through the transcript.

The scrutiny engendered by social media causes an evident sense of angst in Theta. The participant's own high standards and the scrutiny of the social media blogosphere makes publishing a piece "a real personal challenge": "But whenever I press that button, and this I think is a personal challenge, a real personal challenge, I've had with the digital age, I have to be absolutely happy that what I've sent over is the best I could do" (p4). The sense of personal, emotional investment that is stimulated by social media is a motif that occurs later, with the participant admitting to wasting negative energy on Twitter interactions: "Twitter is



personal... I'm probably as guilty as anyone, of looking at the one or two bad comments instead of the 97, 98 good ones. You know, I dwell on those more and you can waste a lot of emotional energy on that. Too much, too much" (p9-10). However, amid the negativity there are constructive comments by impressively well-informed readers: "You'll get some ridiculous, horrendous views and stupid comments, but you'll also get some really informed readers as well, you know, who know their stuff. Really know their stuff inside out. They're not just emotional about it. So they're a real force for good, really" (p15).

While Theta says the anticipation of Twitter reaction doesn't inhibit what he produces, the reaction of trolls and Twitter users generally is a factor that is before his mind: "On Twitter, err, I'm very conscious, I'm interested as soon as an article goes up what are people thinking about that? What are their views on it?... It doesn't inhibit me, but there's definitely a voice in my head thinking that" (p10). It doesn't cause him to self-censor, he says, although there is pressure: "An element of self-censorship comes into your head for sure, but I don't think it, umm, I don't think it greatly – because of the awareness of what people are gonna come back with. But it only comes into your head, you think I've got to make sure I get this absolutely right; that what I'm saying is spot on" (p15). He returns to this later on, admitting the presence of the self-censoring voice in his head: "You have got a degree of self-censorship there... because there's a little part in your mind – there must be – you're sat there typing away, thinking 'Have I got this absolutely right? How's it going to be perceived? How's it going to go down?' And that doesn't mean you're allowing a few clowns to sort of dictate to you. All it does... it just raises that bar a little bit higher than it already was. I'm thinking, I want to have this absolutely nailed on. I don't want anyone to be able to come on here afterwards and say, and pick a little hole in this that I've overlooked" (p20). Theta's self-imposed standards are demanding and social media has intensified them, with the anticipation of outside scrutiny and criticism/abuse permanently driving his work.

A powerful sense of pride in his work suffuses the interview, and this seems to inform Theta's firm and uncompromising interactions with his sports desk when he is put under pressure for quick copy; he won't compromise on standards for the sake of speed: "Everything should be about accuracy and speed, but sometimes does it become more about speed than accuracy? I don't find that with myself. I won't compromise the way I report on things. And I wouldn't"

(p1). And again: “But I’m not going to be – bullied isn’t the right word – I’m not going to be pressurised into delivering something before I’m comfortable with doing that” (p2). He suggests this backbone comes through his experience; younger reporters could yield to the pressure: “And I wouldn’t have any qualms, in the way that a younger reporter would, in saying, ‘I’m sorry, I can’t stand this up at the minute, I’m waiting for someone to come back to me’” (p3). His own very high personal standards mean he does not settle for anything less than what he is entirely happy with: “And that’s quite challenging with the digital age because of what I said at the start: the pressures that you come under to file faster – faster, and faster, and faster. And I found myself fighting against that, thinking... My boss, [REDACTED], [REDACTED], has said to me many times, ‘[REDACTED], it does not have to be one hundred per cent. Sometimes it can be, you know, ninety per cent, it can be seventy per cent.’ And I’m thinking, ‘No.’ Because the reader’s not going to look at that and be thinking, ‘Oh, you were told you could only do it seventy per cent’” (p4). However, he believes reporters on other mainstream titles do on occasion churn others’ copy out of a fear of being criticised by their sports editors: “I’m waiting for calls back, and I feel comfortable saying that. Umm, I do think others might feel, ‘Do you know what? I believe what [REDACTED] have done there, or [REDACTED], I know that reporter, he always gets stuff right, I’m going to go with it too.’ I think they would do that. I think they’d do that to save themselves a bollocking” (p5).

On the issue of self-censorship – of journalists backing off from writing critical content – Theta believes it is a dereliction of duty: “You’d see straight through them and you do with some people, who don’t want to be overly critical of someone because you’re worried about damaging the relationship. That’s not really journalism, is it? You may as well be working for the club” (p17). Evident here is what might be termed a puritan streak in Theta’s approach – uncompromising high standards of himself and of others, and a willingness to voice criticism of those who fall short.

Such a perception on self-censorship is commensurate with Theta’s view of duty. He regards it as multi-faceted, but sees his first duty as to his readers: “I think you have a, yeah, a duty to inform readers. Certainly to be fair and honest with your reporting. Accuracy, obviously. Umm, I think we do have a responsibility as well to, umm, hold people to account” (p3). Commensurate with that is his remark that honesty and truthfulness are the most important

ethical qualities for a sports journalist, even if that means upsetting a contact and jeopardising the relationship. Scrutiny emerges as something that Theta both *does* (to the powerful in sport) and has *done to him* (by the digital-age audience): “You’ve obviously got to be honest and truthful in the way you go about your work. Honest and truthful to yourself, not just to your readers and the people you work for... And it can be hard at times when you, if you get to know someone who becomes a good contact and then things unravel. But you’ve got to report fairly and impartially, you know, that’s the key thing. You’d never want anyone to sort of look at your writing and feel there’s a level of bias there or you’re not scrutinising people in the way that you should” (p4). Scrutiny seems a term that is closely linked in Theta’s mind to duty: it is his duty to scrutinise those in positions of power in sport, just as it is his duty to make sure his articles stand up to the blogosphere’s scrutiny.

Despite a strong sense of duty and thoughtfulness infusing his answers, codes of practice barely register on Theta’s radar: “It’s a totally different strand that isn’t directly applicable to my job. Of course I’m aware of it, but I can’t sit here and say to you now, ‘I consult it often, I look at it often,’ because it doesn’t really impact on me, I feel. I can’t even say on a regular basis, it hardly ever does. Yes, I’m aware of it, but 99 per cent of my work isn’t gonna stray into those areas” (p5-6). Compliance with the code is effectively devolved to the sports desk. “Their scrutiny would be as much if not more than that code of conduct... all those questions would be asked by them at the outset... That’s exactly the reason why I wouldn’t feel the need to consult it because – I’m in danger [REDACTED] sound like the greatest thing in the world – but I’m just trying to say that there are checks in place at the outset that mean I do not have to be referencing that” (p6). However, a minority of sports journalists, those doing investigative work (“a different line of work”), might use it: “Sports journalism doesn’t readily bring you into that – with someone like David Conn it might more often, who’s writing financial stories and stories questioning the way clubs are being run *etcetera*. He does a brilliant job. It’s investigative reporting – that’s what I’m looking for – he’s doing a different line of work” (p6). This remote attitude to codes is perhaps surprising given that Theta reveals he worked with a reporter, Raoul Simons, who was arrested as part of Operation Weeting, the police inquiry into phone hacking: “They were sort of doing what I was really in terms of just having a few clubs that you cover... Raoul was one of them... Lovely guy as well. Terrific bloke” (p13).

Theta's sense of frustration at editorial decisions made on the evidence of audience metrics – including declining word counts – is almost palpable, and he admits to having had arguments with senior colleagues: “I think there's too much emphasis on, I think it's guided far too much by internet hits. And that really is a source of frustration for me... I really enjoy long-form journalism, I think that's restricted me. Really, really frustrated me... It disappoints me because I kind of think, well, that basically means we're saying that the people who are judging how much we write now are the people who are purely the readers. I'm not saying they shouldn't have a say, obviously, but I think it's a two-way relationship. Sometimes something might not generate a massive number of hits but it might be a really well-received article and that should still have a place in my eyes” (p7). However, the participant is in agreement with the title's policy of content reduction (fewer articles being published online each day) – a reversal of earlier policies of putting as much content online as possible. This he views as sensible quality control: “Over time, there came this realisation that, actually, less is more in a way. So we file fewer stories now... So, umm, and that hasn't necessarily been a bad thing. I think content reduction is very different to restricting word counts, umm, because I think you need some quality control” (p8). Again, Theta's earnestness is evident as he seeks to produce work that he feels is both important to him and important to the audience.

This earnestness continues. Theta states in all seriousness that he would resign if asked to do some of the articles that are now used online by more tabloid-style outlets. He cites the example of a story that was based on a photo of Manchester City players wearing woolly hats at a railway station: “In my eyes it isn't journalism... Anyone can do that. Anyone can write that from an office. You're not ringing anyone, you've not got contacts. It's not a story. Someone's editor's just said, 'Here's some photos we've got in, can you write to those pictures?' Then someone's going to turn around to me and say, 'Well, [REDACTED], you're wrong that is journalism today. You've got to move with the times.' But if I was asked to do that I wouldn't do it. I'd find another job, Tom. I would” (p12). Evident again is the puritan streak referred to above, a form of high-mindedness that resonates with the transcript's sense of duty and integrity.

### 5.2.9: Interviewee Nine – Iota

**“The ‘zoo in the corner’ as news sometimes refer to us – ‘Oh, sport are rattling their cages’ ...”**

Iota provides some contrarian perspectives, and begins by offering an unexpected but interesting view on his primary duty, which he says is to himself as a sports fan. This is a yardstick by which the newsworthiness of a story can be assessed: “I absolutely feel that we have a duty to ourselves to begin with as fans, because the first thing I say to anyone who works on our sports desk is ‘We are fans’ and therefore if there’s something at our clubs that is winding us up and riling us then it’s a story, because that is something that fans at those clubs want to read about and want to know about. If it’s something that we don’t care about then I would hazard a guess that it’s something our readers don’t want to know about either” (p2). The suggested logic of his position is that fulfilling that duty to oneself therefore means one also fulfils the duty to readers. Iota states there are competing duties, which it is hard to order into a hierarchy, but which come to be instinctively applied: “It’s our duty to the clubs, the fans and the game itself, as well as to the paper and to society. It’s a balancing act and I don’t think we ever lay down term a, b and c in any particular order, I think eventually we get to the point where there’s an instinct that ‘No, no we’ve got to print that, we have to print that,’ or ‘No, no that’s crossing the line,’ you know, that’s not going to do anyone any favours either for the paper, the person or sport itself, so, umm, again, yeah, quite a fine balance sometimes” (p2). Later on, Iota returns to the importance of sports journalism retaining an element of fandom: “We love it, we love football, we love sport, and that should come across, we should be passionate about what we’re doing. Because if we’re not passionate about it then how are our pages going to look like they’re passionate and what’s the reader going to think afterwards? Yeah, the toy and the games department, and the ‘zoo in the corner’ as news sometimes refer to us – ‘Oh, sport are rattling their cages’ – and whatever else, but you know, we’re as passionate about sport as those news reporters are about delivering news and what they would call more important issues to the nation” (p8).

The bearing of codes of practice, both industry-wide and internal, are “absolutely huge”, says the participant. There are regular refresher courses and tests for staff: “All of us are pretty

well up on legal issues now and historically the mistakes that have been made in the journalism industry, hopefully we won't be making any mistakes like that again because we're all so well-versed" (p4). Adherence to codes is seen in existential terms – compliance is needed to ensure the title's survival: "All those practices have to be really strictly adhered to and otherwise the paper wouldn't be there very long with the current legal issues and all the IPSO regulations that we have to stick to" (p5). This framing of the adherence to codes in existential terms perhaps reflects Iota's past relationship with *The News of the World*, which was closed down following the phone-hacking scandal. However, despite saying that "all of us are pretty well up on legal issues now", Iota goes on to say that he has to closely vet reporters' copy due to potential breaches of media law. While he says he has not witnessed criminal behaviour, he sees himself as "policing" his reporters whose work can contain statements which would trigger legal action; mistakes which he attributes to ignorance: "In a way that's what the desk is for, you know, and I wouldn't pretend that I have anywhere near the nose for sniffing out a story in the reporters' environment as some of our top reporters, but my job in there is almost to police that as well, I would say. Yeah, there have definitely been occasions where you read paragraphs and you think, crikey, if that was in the paper we'd be walking into a court room within a week. Umm, but I wouldn't say, you know, a flagrant sort of, you know, disregard for rules – more ignorance, I think, would be the real offence" (p5).

Despite having worked for *The News of the World*, Iota was not aware of criminal behaviour on its sports desk: "No, I didn't hear, I didn't come across anything at all... I certainly didn't experience, hear, or haven't since heard any wrongdoing on the sports desks" (p5). The denial of knowledge of criminal behaviour on the sports desk of *The News of the World* is categorical.

Iota frames the issue of self-censorship around what he claims is the phenomenon of big-name sports journalists omitting certain stories – or playing them down – for the benefit of their own profiles. Iota says: "I think there's a major issue with that (self-censorship) – an absolutely major issue. Without naming any names, I think that, umm, if there are columnists, reporters who have more Twitter followers... than the newspaper sells copies, then there's something wrong. Umm, because there are journalists, there are reporters, who have a very, dare I say, clever way of manipulating when another paper does a genuine story, umm, for

their own means, for their own Twitter followers, for their own personal gain of going on TV and radio and commenting on it, and giving it a very positive twist that goes against what a, what a tabloid newspaper or another newspaper would do... Some journalists will topspin those and will... withhold information that they do know because they feel like they're going to get a more positive reaction on Twitter or other social media or on the radio if they say 'Oh no, I know him he's a lovely lad' and, you know, 'I've never heard things like that before'. And I wouldn't, I wouldn't accuse them of, you know, of wrongdoing in that, but I think that is an absolute dilemma" (p6). Social media, and the increased profile that can come with it, therefore becomes a mechanism for calculated self-censorship, and Iota's dislike for those who practice it is evident.

Iota generally views social media with caution. He develops the line of thought examined in the previous paragraph. For those with very large social media followings, he believes Twitter can skew a sports journalist's news sense and leave them unduly influenced: "If you were a reporter with a very large number of followers – hundreds of thousands if not millions of followers – fortunately I'm not in that position, I keep quite quiet on Twitter, and err, but if you are one of those people then your alerts and notifications light up and that is going to influence your decision-making. And it shouldn't... ok, that can be part of it, but it shouldn't be the driving force and I think that, umm, you know, as I say, this would be a long debate with some reporters who do have a lot of Twitter followers, but I would suggest to them that they are influenced too much by, by those followers and they would often take a stance in a column that they shouldn't do" (p7). The implication is that reporters pander to their Twitter followers; and the larger the following, the greater the pandering.

#### **5.2.10 Interviewee Ten – Kappa**

**"If I didn't do this job I would not be on social media. I've got no interest in it whatsoever. I find it vile."**

Most striking about this interview is my sense, as a philosopher rather than a psychologist, of how the interviewee is suffering from a state of burnout, in which stress at their current workload, uncertainty at their own professional identity, and anxiety over the future direction

of sports journalism all combine. This emerges steadily as the interview goes on, culminating in some frustrated verbal outbursts and then more resigned, almost morose, statements. Their final remark – “I feel quite depressed [laughs]. No, I’m joking, I’m joking” (p16) – while qualified, does seemingly hint at an underlying dissatisfaction and disaffection with the sports media and her role in it. There are strains of contempt for the industry, and self-doubt.

A key theme that emerges is Kappa’s confused state about their own professional status: are they a journalist or, due to their work with a competition’s official broadcast channel, are they working more in the realm of public relations? This point emerges at the very start, and as the interview progresses, develops into something of a professional existential crisis. At the outset they state: “I’m not a bobby on the beat as it were anymore and because I kind of work for a little bit of, again, for more of a propaganda machine in terms of [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. You know, you’re working for [REDACTED] so it’s so sanitised now... I don’t ask awkward questions any more” (p1). The asking of difficult questions is viewed by them as defining of a genuine sports journalist. Giving an example of a story they couldn’t broadcast because they were working for a league programme, they continue: “I mean to begin with I didn’t feel like I was really being a journalist, if I’m honest. When I first started doing it, it sat very uncomfortably with me” (p1). However, they state how they now automatically “filter” (in other words, self-censor) certain content that they feel the competition broadcaster would not want them to cover: “I think I’m used to it now, so I filter... That kind of stuff jars a little bit with me” (p1-2). While rejecting the notion of them having a dual identity, they do say that they frequently move between two approaches: “I can move between them because some Saturdays I’m working for [REDACTED] covering [REDACTED] match and doing post-match interviews and sometimes I’m working for [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. So, umm, for [REDACTED], for example, if there were any pitch invasions, problems, *etcetera* on a match when I’ve got my [REDACTED] hat on that’s not something I would then tweet about, talk about, because I’m there, you know, under their umbrella. For [REDACTED] that’s something I can then immediately talk about” (p2). The competition broadcaster coverage is, they say again, “sanitised” and it is this process of being involved in the sanitisation that seems to cause them, at moments, professional angst; a sense that they have moved away from being a ‘proper’ journalist.



Later, when asked about their views on the usefulness of tags such as ‘fans with typewriters’ to describe sports journalists, Kappa makes their most vivid statement of exasperation at the current state of sports journalism: “I don’t know how, I don’t know how to articulate this at all. God, I don’t why I’m even working in this fucking industry. Say that out loud! [Laughs] It does make you feel like that sometimes” (p11). The desire for a simpler form of sports journalism is then hinted at a little later in the interview: “I would probably say I’m quite a simple person. I get sent to a game, I want to report on the game. I’m not really a hardened breaking news journalist, I would say” (p12). This then leads to a confession of being overwhelmed by the current nature of their work, a point that preoccupies the participant for much of the remainder of the interview, and which culminates in them pondering their own future in the industry: “I would say my biggest problem being a freelancer is that I suffer from massive overwhelm. There is so much – I cannot just focus on one thing, umm, and give it 100 per cent attention, which means I can’t be an expert on anything” (p13). And again: “It’s really noisy. I don’t know if that’s just me getting old. I feel like I am getting old and I, I mean, and I think also as a freelancer it’s really difficult because you are, it is busy, it’s always busy. Umm, and then because you’re supposed to be on top of everything that probably adds to the overwhelm, I would say... I still think there are outstanding journalists out there who are determined to get the truth no matter what and I’m so pleased they’re still there. I would say from my personal point of view I’ve probably along the way lost that a little bit, erm, I just don’t have enough time, I would say” (p14). It seems that Kappa is spread too thinly across their work, and the work that they are doing is not giving them the satisfaction of “getting to the truth”.

A sense of exhaustion with the industry and a desire for a “quiet life” is then stated. Kappa’s refusal to want to engage anymore with the 24-hour nature of the sports journalism cycle, as they see it, prompts them to doubt their suitability for a future in the industry: “I think if, probably if I’m going to hold my hands up, a lot of what I do now is more money-orientated because I’ve got a mortgage and a life and I think I’ve decided that there is – there are – power people who are always going to be power people, and I’m not, I don’t know whether I have enough fight in me to fight the power people, I think. I want a quiet life... I also think that perhaps what will come out more and more is that a lot of people will be exhausted by it all, and that it’s more and more competitive – you’ve got to be, you’ve literally got to work 24

hours a day, it feels, in order to be relevant, in order to be important, in order to be on top of everything, and, you know, I work 18 hours a day some days. Working 24 hours a day does not appeal to me... And I don't, I think perhaps that makes me not necessarily, umm, a journalist with a future maybe... It's exhausting. Really exhausting, actually" (p14-15). The potential root cause of some of their frustration is hinted at here with the sudden mention of "power people". It would seem that there is some form of resentment, although this is speculation.

For Kappa, questions around a sports journalist's duties become connected with questions of journalistic identity. The duties "depends on the agenda", they say, before soon adding: "There's a big part of me that doesn't feel as much as a journalist now as I used to be, perhaps" (p3). Duties shift depending on the role. This dovetails with their earlier comments about having to take different approaches on Saturdays depending on whom they are working for.

Kappa vividly expresses their loathing of social media and the damage they believe it can do to sports media. They view social media as a necessary evil of their profession. They consider it "vile" and say they would not use it if they weren't a journalist:

*Kappa: "If I'm really honest, if I didn't do this job I would not be on social media. I've got no interest in it whatsoever. I find it vile.*

*TB: But you feel a, it's almost an occupational necessity?*

*Kappa: Absolutely. Yeah, I feel like I would not be relevant if I wasn't on it. And I feel like my – I'm going to sound like one of these, and this is what I hate – I feel like my profile wouldn't be high if I wasn't on it. And I feel nowadays that people are given jobs based on profile – think influencer" (p10).*

Kappa is concerned that social media, both for young sports journalists and established big-name journalists, is a medium of self-absorption where profile trumps accuracy. Considering young journalists, they say: "You know, again, it becomes a narcissistic endeavour of – I want to get noticed, so I'm going to say this and see who picks up on it. Well, who's then going to

find out whether that's true or not?" (p3). For senior journalists Kappa suggests the need to be a "personality" can eclipse the basic role and tasks of journalism (p4).

Connectedly, Kappa readily admits they self-censor their radio punditry and social media, primarily out of concern at how what they say will be portrayed and twisted on social media. Kappa goes on to say that they enjoy broadcasting less as a consequence: "I'm probably over-cautious. I probably overly self-censor because stuff gets twisted all the time and so I'm really conscious, I mean I'm quite, I'm really careful what I put on Twitter. I'm actually nervous – I've been doing stuff back on [REDACTED] again – I'm actually nervous about it. I can't enjoy – I don't enjoy myself broadcasting as much as I used to because everybody just wants to pick up on one negative thing that you've said or twist something you've said and, as I say, that then becomes fact, even when it's taken out of context, and because you don't have a right of reply and because I don't spend my life on social media, umm, there's then a worry that people have got a perception of you or your opinion or that you slagged someone" (p9). This is another section where Kappa's contempt for the way they believe the industry is heading comes through. They appear to view social media as a corrupting and distorting influence, where profile and perception is placed above truth and substance.

A recurring theme in the interview – although they do not state it simply at any point – is mistrust of young journalists, whom they fear do not fact-check as thoroughly as they should and who are anxious to make a name for themselves through social media. This overall mistrust emerges in Kappa's response to a question about the extent of illegality among sports journalists: "No, no. Umm... but again I don't get involved in the heavy stuff, so I wouldn't really be, umm, and most, most journalists I encounter are very fair and wouldn't put a story out without having done their research. The younger kids I don't know so well, umm, I don't know... I don't really trust anybody anymore" (p8). That a question about law/ethics then becomes an expression of disillusion about the future is perhaps indicative of the wider existential angst about the industry and Kappa's place in it.

Kappa has a clear sense that a converged media requires a code of practice that covers all platforms, otherwise more traditional broadcasters are at a disadvantage to web-based outlets which, Kappa claims, can escape having to adhere to Ofcom regulations (p5).

Moreover, they regard codes as vital as a means of ensuring the media is held to account and differentiated from amateur content, otherwise fake news could proliferate. The existence and adherence to codes is bound up in the participant's mind with defining what it is to be a professional journalist: "I don't think the internet has to be free. The press have to be free in one point of view, but you also have to be held to account or otherwise you are gonna get people who are not trained journalists who have their own agendas, or somebody else's agenda, that are then gonna be... purporting fake news. You have to stop that. You know, I 100 per cent believe in freedom of the press but there has to be a code of ethics that everybody abides by otherwise it is open for abuse... I've been trained whereas... Joe Bloggs next to me hasn't been trained and doesn't actually know the implication of getting stuff wrong, or misreporting facts" (p6). It is perhaps unsurprising that Kappa, given their grievances and misgivings over the direction of digital sports media, is in favour of firm regulation.

### **5.2.11 Synthesis of IPA Interviews**

This section provides an internal synthesis of the interviews, while also connecting them to the existing literature. Concepts from the existing literature are, in some instances, redeployed to help deepen the analysis and understanding of the research objectives. The pervasive issue of social media (which forms a backdrop to each of the objectives) is considered first, before the data is discussed as it relates specifically to each research objective.

#### *5.2.11.1 Social Media*

A prominent theme that emerges from the IPA interview analysis is the multifarious and sometimes complex ways social media poses ethical and editorial issues for sports journalists. These issues primarily stem from the flattening of the "sports media hierarchy" (Gibbs and Haynes, 2013), with the increased interactivity between journalist and audience posing opportunities but also difficulties. While there is ambivalence about social media's benefits there is no ambivalence about its ubiquity, with this ubiquity underscoring Rowe and Hutchins' description of how in the digital era sports journalists operate in an environment

where there is a plenitude of content (2013). Attitudes to social media vary hugely. Gamma speaks positively of it being the biggest change in his working practice, enabling a closer alignment of his content to fans' interests, while Delta enthusiastically predicts the continued growth of social as her employer seeks to attract a younger demographic. Kappa, on the other hand, refers to social media as "vile" and a "narcissistic endeavour" and ardently insists they would have nothing to do with it were they not a sports journalist, while Iota (and Theta to a lesser extent) suggests that big Twitter followings effectively corrupt sports journalists, describing himself as "fortunate" not to have a very large number of followers.

Echoing Cairns's view on the distribution of sports media misinformation (2018), the majority of interviewees state that social media facilitates the spread of inaccuracies (Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, Zeta, Eta, Theta, Kappa), yet for some it is viewed as a valuable platform because, perhaps surprisingly and paradoxically, it can be a potent driver of improved standards of accuracy. The interactive dimension of social media means reporters feel their work is scrutinised more than ever before, prompting them to be more thorough than they were in the pre-social era. The audience, they know, will point out inaccuracies and sensationalism (Beta, Gamma, Delta, Theta). As such, social media is not only a spur to competition between sports journalists (Gibbs and Haynes, 2013), but a spur to greater thoroughness – despite the disquiet voiced elsewhere in the interviews about the digital era shortening the amount of time spent on stories. Theta is particularly emphatic about this, and an almost visceral sense emerges of his commitment to getting things absolutely right so that there can be no comeback on social media. However, it seems to be a fine line between scrutiny and abuse, a point that emerges particularly in Gamma's transcript. If the interactivity facilitated by social media can lead to a raising of the bar in terms of the lengths sports journalists go to in order to ensure accuracy, it is also a platform for abuse, as Binns' work (2017a, 2017b) has suggested. Online abuse – and how to deal with it – occurs in many transcripts: Eta talks of the "vitriol" directed at football journalists by "tribal" fans; Theta admits to the emotionally draining experience of engaging with the negative comments of trolls; Epsilon simply does not use social media interactively; Gamma views online abuse as something that is part of the job ("you've got to accept that you're going to get some at some point"); while for Delta a regular concern is whether a piece of social media that she posts will open up the subject of that content to abuse. For some participants, online abuse – whether

at them or to the subjects of their stories – seems like a quotidian experience. As such, the research builds on Binns’s (2017a) findings of online abuse across the newsroom, providing a vivid sense of sports journalists’ specific experience of digital abuse. It also elaborates on the Chapter 2 case study, in which David Walsh admitted to receiving “abuse and insults” on Twitter over his decision to embed with Team Sky (2013: 207).

There are various ways in which social media is viewed with caution by sports journalists. In words reminiscent of Steen’s prescription to “choose your views carefully” (2014: 160), Kappa states that they are wary of posting on social media due to fear of their words and opinions being “twisted”, while Gamma voices concerns that the immediacy of Twitter makes it “dangerous” for sports journalists in that it can draw them into hastily, and rashly, made posts. The view that social media can be used by sports journalists as a profile-building tool at the expense of truth is conveyed by Alpha, Theta, Iota and Kappa. Their points elaborate on Steen’s view of Twitter fuelling a “cult of the personality” among sports journalists (2014: 43). Iota believes it can be seductive and corrupting, with journalists surrendering their independence for the sake of appealing to the Twitter crowd. For those with very large social media followings, he believes Twitter can contaminate a sports journalist’s news sense and leave them influenced by what they think will be well received by their followers. The implication is that reporters can be led by their Twitter followers, and that the greater the following the more likely they are to be led. In a related point, he also believes that the increased profile that can come with social media becomes a mechanism for self-censorship, a point which is discussed further below. Kappa and Alpha make points that echo Iota’s. Kappa suggests the need to be a social media “personality” can eclipse the basic role and tasks of journalism: ego comes to the fore, with an emphasis on perception at the expense of substance. For Zeta, social media encourages poor journalistic habits, with an increasing dependency on social media making young sports journalists “lazier” and sedentary. He also connects the rise of social media to plagiarism, churnalism and the withering of the variety of sports covered by mainstream media outlets, the final point being one that Gamma makes too.

### *5.2.11.2 Research Objective One: Self-Censorship*

Self-censorship is a consistently recurring issue with the participants. This suggests that, as with the news media (Binns, 2017a; Kohut, 2000; Preston, 2009; Sturges, 2008), self-censorship is a prevalent issue in sports journalism.

Alpha and Gamma refer to themselves as being in a constant state of self-editing, while Iota – in remarks that resonate with MacKenzie (2016) – views self-censorship as an “absolutely major issue”. The types of self-censorship are varied and the causes diverse. What emerges is how social media has brought about forms of self-censorship which have far-reaching consequences for the flow of accurate information and the flow of honestly-held opinions. Iota conveys an example of the former most vividly, Kappa the latter.

Iota describes how social media can inhibit the expression of truth. He connects the issue of self-censorship with high-profile sports journalists ignoring or playing down certain stories for the benefit of their own profiles. Anticipating that they will get a more favourable response from their Twitter followers, reporters can neglect certain negative stories or dismiss them, or portray them in a more positive light, even when they know them to be true. A journalist’s desire to ‘play to the Twitter gallery’, as it were, and boost their online profile therefore becomes a mechanism for self-censorship. This carries echoes of Das and Kramer’s (2013) concept of how a member of the public’s self-censorship of their social media can preserve their “social capital” by preventing their online friends from feeling alienated. As Iota describes it, some sports journalists do something similar, judiciously self-censoring in order to bolster their journalistic capital on social media – a capital whose size can be measured in terms of number of followers.

Social media inhibits the expression of views, too. Kappa readily admits to self-censoring their radio punditry and social media output, primarily out of concern at how what they say will be misrepresented on Twitter. They say they “probably overly self-censor because stuff gets twisted all the time”. The self-censorship thus seems, in part, like a means of online professional self-preservation, which resonates with Dans’s notion of self-censorship on

social media being a means of digital “survival” (2014). Kappa states they do not enjoy radio broadcasting because they are apprehensive at the response they will receive.

Building on the quadripartite taxonomy of news journalism self-censorship provided by Sturges (2008), the taxonomy of reasons given by interview participants for self-censorship in sports journalism can be distilled as follows:

1. Desire to retain a relationship with a sportsperson or preserving contacts more broadly (Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, Zeta, Eta, Theta)
2. Fear of getting facts wrong and then being criticised on social media (Theta)
3. Respect for on/off record distinction, even in matters potentially of public interest (Epsilon)
4. Fear of defamation/legal action (Alpha, Eta)
5. Wariness of voicing the “wrong” view or story angle on social media and receiving a hostile reaction, or fear of one’s words or opinion being “twisted” on social media (Alpha, Kappa)
6. Information considered not to be in the public interest (Beta, Gamma)
7. Desire to avoid provoking “silly spats” on social media or being over-emotional – the digital equivalent of not ‘cheering in the press box’ (Gamma)
8. Respect for not potentially triggering the social media-based “bashing” of a public figure/duty of care to a sportsperson (Delta, Epsilon, Beta)
9. Desire to benefit one’s own standing as a journalist on social media (Iota)
10. Not wanting to taint a sport one loves (Eta)
11. Desire to preserve one’s career, including one’s relationship with other journalists, and for the sake of a “quiet life” (Eta)

Many of these resonate with the motivations for self-censorship discussed in the David Walsh case study, and those considered by Bradshaw and Minogue (2020). However, the complexity of the web of reasons connected to social media usage is new. These reasons are not necessarily exhaustive of why sports journalists self-censor, but they capture the interviewees’ motivations for self-censoring.



### *5.2.11.3 Research Objective Two – Ethics (and Duties)*

Ethical issues old and new concern the participants. There is no sense of the participants regarding “media ethics” as an “oxymoron” (Cohen-Almagor, 2001). While “traditional” concerns such as the ability to report the truth accurately (Preston, 2009) and the detachment/cosiness of relationships with sources are held up as significant issues by some (Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Epsilon and Eta), digital media (and social media in particular) pose fresh issues, with Delta, Zeta, Eta, Iota and Kappa articulating different concerns. The power of social media as a mechanism for abuse is a concern that runs through much of Delta’s interview, while for Zeta verifying the authenticity of material and social media accounts now presents “major questions and major dilemmas” for sports journalists. Eta contends that the premium placed on speed of publication in the digital age narrows the number of sources that are consulted and therefore undermines the depth of the journalism, and can also prepare the conditions for the spread of misinformation. Kappa voices a mistrust of young journalists, who they fear do not fact-check as thoroughly as they should and who are anxious to make a name for themselves through social media. Iota articulates the social media distortions discussed in the previous section, and also mentions sensitivities around the portrayal of race as an important ethical issue for sports desks, reflecting Bradshaw and Minogue’s concerns with the representation of diversity in the sports media (2020).

Duties are declared by participants, but there is generally little coherence to them, with some often being in contradiction – or at least tension – with one another, as outlined in the respective individual IPAs above. There are duties to be accurate and to tell the truth; duties to the audience; duties to one’s employer; duties to oneself; duties to the people one is writing about; duties to sport. For most participants, it seems to be a question they had not considered before, or at least perhaps not considered in any depth. Overall, there is little impression of the Walshian sense of duty contained in the Chapter 2 case study (Walsh, 2012) or a sense of a deontological approach to media ethics outlined in Sanford Horner (2015), with one notable exception.

Theta conveys an intense desire to be both accurate and to produce original material. Although he does not use the word, he is a perfectionist. This duty to unimpeachable

accuracy, as it might be termed, is something that comes from within. This is an intrinsic rather than an extrinsic duty for Theta. Even when his editors tell him that things “don’t always have to be 100 per cent”, he cannot bring himself to submit anything that falls short of his own internally-imposed standards. To use the Kantian idiom, it is a categorical imperative for him. His journalistic conscience speaks to him in the imperative voice, and it cannot admit of any exception.

One interesting tension arises from some participants’ assertion that they have a duty to look after the subjects of stories. This is made by Delta and Epsilon and, to a lesser extent, by Beta. One question that immediately arises is how compatible this is with a duty to truth and accuracy; it is potentially a springboard into self-censorship, as captured in the section above. Interestingly, other participants (Alpha, Gamma and Zeta) effectively suggest the opposite: a duty not to be scared of upsetting contacts and subjects, suggesting that a sports journalist will not get far in the industry if such concerns weigh too heavily. This represents an interesting bifurcation in the interviewees’ sense of duty, with the former emphasising duty to others over other duties.

Kappa suggests that their duties as a freelancer are conditional rather than absolute; they shift depending on what work they are doing. This is a point that reflects their parallel roles as both independent journalist and official broadcaster for a sports organisation. It is possible that this unsteady sense of duty is also connected to their state of exhaustion and professional self-doubt.

Cairns (2018) and Luckhurst and Phippen (2014) refer to the inadequacy of codes and laws as causes for ethical media behaviour, and a theme that emerges in the interviews is how sports journalists’ behaviour is informed or regulated as much by instinct and unwritten rules as it is by formal codes or laws. Iota states that there are competing duties, which are not placed into an explicit specific order, but which come to be instinctively applied; he talks of there being “unwritten rules” around editorial duties. In a similar vein, Beta refers to instinct telling him what is and what is not on the record when doing an interview, something he attributes to his time spent in the industry. Elsewhere, Iota talks of “policing” his reporters to ensure legal and regulatory compliance.

In a section considering the observance of editorial embargoes arising from press conferences, Alpha emphasises the “unwritten rule” of the press pack. Anyone who breaches an embargo receives a firm and quick attack from the pack, resulting in a type of professional banishment. As Alpha views it, self-policing is an important mechanism of media regulation. There are echoes here of what Boyle refers to the “group mentality” of the journalistic pack, a pack that travels with and works intimately with its own members and its main contacts (Boyle, 2017: 493).

#### *5.2.11.4 Research Objective Three – Codes of Conduct*

There is little harmony in the interviewees’ views on the importance or otherwise of codes. Broadly, the perception of codes fall into two camps: they are either regarded as 1) of limited relevance and therefore of limited importance to sports journalism, something that someone else at the outlet will deal with, or something rendered obsolete by internal standards; or 2) useful and significant, with compliance with a code ensuring ‘trusted source’/professional status for an outlet as distinct from other material on the internet. This broadly conforms to the manifold views on the usefulness of journalism codes contained in the literature (Norris, 2000; Keeble, 2009; Sanford Horner 2015). Overall, views on codes are generally expressed tepidly, although there are some exceptions: Iota views compliance with the Editors’ Code of Practice in existential terms, as helping to guarantee his title’s survival; Kappa states the need for a universal code for all journalism platforms. None of the interviewees give voice to the idea of a bespoke code of practice for sports journalists, as has been proposed by Ramon-Vegas and Rojas-Torrijos (2018).

A notable finding is the contrast between the attitude of ‘quality’ newspaper reporters to codes and a tabloid sports editor. While Beta and Theta, who both work for the same title, downplay the relevance of the code to sports journalists (with Beta admitting to not knowing whether his newspaper is signed up to IPSO or IMPRESS), Iota is emphatic about the importance and relevance of the Editors’ Code of Practice. A tentative explanation for this could be that tabloids, by the nature of their stories, are more likely to push up against the

clauses of the code, thereby requiring editors to have a sharp understanding of what can and cannot be published.

Also notable is the manner in which some participants devolve their compliance onto more senior colleagues. The logic here from Delta and Theta is that the outlet's hierarchy will effectively do the reasoning for them. As it says above in the individual IPA of Delta's transcript: "The clear sense comes through of the corporation's hierarchy providing a kind of comfort blanket or safety net, to the extent that Delta conveys a low sense of concern at breaching the code herself." At this point, McEnnis' notion of the "toy department within the toy department" (2018b) can perhaps be reconfigured and reapplied. While McEnnis invoked the concept to refer to the sense of superiority that established legacy media sports journalists might feel towards their digital-only colleagues, it can be transposed here to refer to less autonomous sports journalists delegating upwards their own ethical compliance to more senior colleagues, who can then do the reasoning and compliance on their behalf.

While Zeta admits to having published player transfer stories which he knew were not true – or which he knew would not come to pass – there is a general insistence by participants that they have not broken the law or committed serious code breaches, and nor were they aware of colleagues having done so. Eta hints that sports journalists' inside knowledge can lead to criminal betting behaviour. Zeta says he has ghost-written columns which were entirely made up and which had not been approved by the columnist – a phenomenon which could be termed fabricated opinion – and that he knows colleagues who completely made up news stories. He says he would have in all likelihood hacked phones had he known how to do so (see next section). Iota, in his senior editorial role, says he has prevented reporters from publishing pieces which would have resulted in swift court action, but says that these mistakes were done out of "ignorance" rather than deliberately. Despite most participants' firm insistence on not having broken the law or codes, some of their descriptions of particular incidents and working practices suggest that on occasion they may have not represented the full truth of stories. An example of this is Epsilon's account of the difference between the statements given to her in on-the-record interviews about a controversial topic and off-the-record remarks which contradicted them. The serious allegations made by Jennings of sports journalists effectively being complicit in cover-ups (Jennings 2012; Miller 2015; Ponsford

2010) finds a muted resonance here. While there are no instances of interviewees admitting to having churned the type of misinformation captured by Corcoran (2014), Kappa expresses the notion that virality rather than truth is now the principal currency of online information (Hermida 2016; Smith 2016; Viner 2016).

#### 5.2.11.5 Phone Hacking and The News of the World

While it is not a direct research objective of this thesis to investigate historical phone hacking within the sports departments of the UK press, data emerges from the IPA interviews that does pertain to this important area, particularly with regard to the now-defunct *The News of the World*. While the Leveson Inquiry (2012) was a thorough investigation into hacking and other ethical issues, the lens was not specifically on sports journalism, so the findings here add something to the understanding of this important period in the history of UK journalism. Eta, Zeta and Iota all worked for *NotW* in various capacities in the period leading up to the phone-hacking scandal. All are adamant that they did not hack phones and were not aware of phone hacking taking place. If this is taken at face value, then the claim that phone hacking was omnipresent at *NotW* – “Everyone knew [about phone hacking]. The office cat knew” (former *NotW* reporter Sean Hoare, quoted in Rusbridger, 2018: 189) – is contradicted.

Zeta, however, states that he probably would have hacked phones had he been aware of the practice and known how to do it. This would have been done out of pressure to secure big stories. Eta claims he would be “staggered” if phone hacking had not been used at *NotW* in connection with more stories involving sports stars than has been reported, but admits he has “no evidence whatsoever”. Relatedly, Theta describes how he worked with Raoul Simons, the only sports journalist to be arrested as part of Operation Weeting. Theta was clearly unaware of any suggestion of phone hacking at the title they worked on, describing Simons, who was never charged, as a “terrific bloke”.

#### 5.2.11.6 Research Objective Four – Lived Experience and Professional Identity

A striking feature is just how much emotion – positive and negative – is manifested by the participants in the course of reflecting on their work. Sadness, passion, self-doubt, self-

criticism, anger and sheer infectious excitement are among them. This has echoes of David Walsh's personal emotional engagement to reporting captured in this project's case study. This data also builds on the emotions captured in journalistic autobiographies, such as Humphries (2003), but the register in which they are expressed is more raw, direct and done without the need for literary effect. Theta's accounts of striving for unimpeachable accuracy and quality in his work border on the obsessive, for example, and he describes the extent of his emotional involvement and investment in his work in arresting terms ("But whenever I press that button, and this I think is a personal challenge, a real personal challenge I've had with the digital age, I have to be absolutely happy that what I've sent over is the best I could do"). Underlying this is his previously noted uncompromising Kantian streak of obeying the imperative he feels to only publish content that he believes adheres to his own high standards (although this does jar with his stance of effectively delegating code compliance onto his editors). Eta reveals the emotional toll of writing stories, on one occasion bursting into tears upon the completion of an article. The energy with which Iota describes the way he runs his sports desk made me want to be on it.

There are also instances of what appear to be hints or admissions of burnout. Kappa seems to feel these as a consequence of their belief that they need to have an influencer-style social media persona if they are to continue to receive work, despite loathing social media. Boyle has written of contemporary sports journalists needing to "adapt and reinvent" themselves (2017: 494), and Kappa perhaps illustrates the personal dangers of this reinvention. Zeta, who moved over to the news desk just days before the interview following two decades as a sports journalist, suggests that ennui and tiredness prompted the switch. Kappa is more explicit, with an undertow of exhaustion, self-doubt and frustration with the profession running through the interview ("God, I don't why I'm even working in this fucking industry. Say that out loud!"). Sports journalism can be a "treadmill" (Epsilon, Zeta) in the sense of involving the repetitive coverage of live events and press conferences, but that can be a source of comfort to some as opposed to a source of fatigue ("I like being on that treadmill – it's not a bad place to be" (Epsilon)).

Some of these strong emotional responses arise from a firm sense of professional identity and purpose; others arise from a diluted or uncertain sense of professional identity and

purpose. This arguably reflects the shifting landscape of sports media and the changing roles of sports journalists explored by Bradshaw and Minogue (2020). Theta is clear about his role as a sports journalist: to produce original content (“something different”) that is of the highest editorial standards. Kappa, by contrast, is riven with doubt about what their essential identity is, splitting as they do their time between working for sports news outlets and a competition’s official channel.

Echoing Gibbs and Haynes (2013), the growing sports media relations sector is also affecting the sense of sports journalists’ professional identity. More specifically, it could be said to be forcing a reshaping and sharpening of it, as sports journalists seek to distinguish themselves from the content provided by clubs (Gamma, Delta, Zeta, Eta). These participants view clubs as new media rivals, affirming Grimmer’s (2017) position that top-level football organisations have evolved into sports and media businesses. Sports organisations’ communications departments are using digital platforms to deliver their own content couched in their own corporately beneficial narrative (

Sports journalism comes across in the IPA interviews as a variegated industry, reinforcing Boyle’s stance that “there are huge variations in the range, diversity and quality of the output that gets tagged as sports journalism” (2017: 493). It is difficult, perhaps even bogus, to attempt to distil what its essence is. What emerges in the interviewees’ transcripts is that the platforms, voices and activities are diverse and in an ongoing state of flux as the ramifications of the digital revolution still unfold, resonating with Bradshaw and Minogue (2020). Wittgenstein’s concept of ‘family resemblance’ (1953/2009: 66) is therefore pertinent here as a metaphor and tool for capturing the diversity – and yet loose unity – of the different pursuits that constitute contemporary sports journalism. The activities cannot be neatly captured in a single word or pithy phrase, yet they are all bound by a looser sense of commonality.

While much of the IPA data focuses on digital activity, it would be wrong to assume that the traditional ‘old ways’ are gone. Iota’s passionate description of producing stimulating,

entertaining back pages for his tabloid creates a vivid sense that print is very far from being dead on his outlet's sports desk. There are, however, times when there is a sense that the opportunities that print once provided are being mourned. There is a touch of nostalgia, for example, in Beta saying there are now few opportunities for "leafy lane" (i.e. essay-style) sports journalism, although since the interview took place the emergence of *The Athletic* in the UK as an online-only subscription football title has enabled longer-form football writing to enjoy something of a resurgence (Franklin-Wallis, 2020).

The "new era of investigative reporting" proclaimed by Jewell (2016) is hard to detect among the interviewees, even among reporters with a track record of scoops such as Eta. Pressures of time – and a lack of opportunity to go off-diary – emerge as a recurring explanation as to why hard news is not always gathered. Even so, Eta's view of sports journalism functions as a firm challenge to Rowe's accusation of sports journalism operating in "self-imposed and isolating limits that leave it continually open to professional challenge and even contempt" (2007: 400-401). Eta diagnoses a "quotes-based" culture in sports journalism in which anodyne quotes are used unthinkingly, even when there is no strong line in them. He vigorously repudiates this, as do Theta and Zeta, with the former taking issue too with the herd-like live tweeting of press conferences. Instead they place an emphasis on the production of original material and the asking of original questions. Alpha offers an overview of his work that suggests there is scope for the same journalist to perform both watchdog sports journalism and fan-with-typewriter-style journalism, the latter being a tag he gleefully accepts. Rather than being a binary distinction of opposites, they are perhaps more porous and can be used of the same journalist at different moments. Elsewhere, there is less zeal for sports journalists pursuing hard news ("Sports journalists will invariably duck out of a news story" – Zeta). However, there is evidence too of an unyielding commitment to serious-minded sports journalism, perhaps most forcefully displayed by Theta when he states that he would quit if asked to write clickbait-type picture caption stories – a firmly worded refusal to engage in the form of "tasty morsel" clickbait football journalism discussed by Cable and Mottershead (2018: 78). Offering a different standpoint to all of the above is Gamma, who views himself as an informed facilitator of debate about the clubs he is covering.



Delta delivers content exclusively for social channels, but the challenge for her is to engage with both the outlet's traditional mature demographic and the younger demographic that the outlet is clearly at pains to secure. The capturing of a young audience is something that also concerns Epsilon, who stresses the importance of gathering footage that is more suited to a younger, social media-focused demographic. Delta talks of the outlet not wanting to speak with a voice that is the journalistic equivalent of being the "dad at the disco". The Dad at the Disco phenomenon, as it might be termed, could be a concept that is usefully applied to all legacy media sports news outlets as they grope towards a voice and identity that is acceptable to a young audience, a point that I articulated in a piece published a month prior to the submission of this thesis (Bradshaw, 2020).

A number of participants emphasise the need to embrace an element of fandom in their coverage (Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Iota). This is distinct from unreconstructed characterisations of sports journalists pursuing "cheerleading" at the cost of watchdog journalism (Rowe, 2005 and 2007), and represents in some instances a form of adaptation to a new media ecosystem that has digital interactivity at its heart. Gamma articulates a thoughtful position about his content being responsive to social media and being "fan-led" (i.e. functioning as a hub where the interests of fans are deepened and debated), while Iota effectively makes fandom a requirement of working on his sports desk at a national newspaper ("the first thing I say to anyone who works on our sports desk is 'We are fans' and therefore if there's something at our clubs that is winding us up and riling us then it's a story"). Beta provides a subtle account of how it is possible to be emotionally involved in a sporting spectacle (and even display behaviours that are non-neutral) yet produce professional content. The traditional notion of detached, impartial journalism (Preston, 2009) is to some extent subverted by these approaches, but the characterisations of it as unthinking, fans-with-typewriters-style material is too crude and does not capture the subtlety of the sports journalists' activities. It might be characterised as sports journalists perceiving themselves as needing to be *of* the fans while not necessarily *a* fan.

The concept of ghettoization invoked by Boyle, Rowe and Whannel can be reimagined and redeployed here. They posed the question: "Has the sports desk been ghettoized, insulating itself from the wider concerns and contexts with which it should be engaged?" (Boyle, Rowe

and Whannel, 2010: 247). In the new digital habitat of fan-led content, a form of deliberate online ghetto inhabitation is arguably essential by sports journalists in order to ensure their enduring relevance and engagement with audiences. By inhabiting this ghetto and both listening to the concerns within it and presiding over the debates within in, sports journalists can protect their journalistic standing and distinctiveness in the new media ecosystem. This arguably leads to the need to rethink – and reformulate – the kind of foundational approaches that sports journalists take to their work. Arguably, the “routine of objectivity” (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996) and “strategic ritual” (Tuchman, 1977) are to be supplanted by an approach which, while still having reliability at its centre, is also mindful of the need to be *of* the fans. Such an approach acknowledges that the growth of digital media, and social media especially, lends itself to a more opinion-focused sports news culture (Sherwood and Nicholson, 2012). Moreover, the new form of media rivalry between sports journalists and elite sports clubs analysed above has accelerated a shift towards fan-led material, with Gamma articulating a detailed editorial policy around this.

### **5.3 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Diaries**

The IPA takes each of the three diaries separately, analyses them in isolation, and extracts the key themes from each one. As with the interviews, the threads and themes from the separate analyses are then synthesised, so that similarities, differences, tensions and harmonies across the sample can be identified. They are synthesised too with the existing literature. The marked-up diaries and the initial IPA distillation of each one are contained in Appendix 4.

#### **5.3.1 Diary One – November**

**“Even a couple of minutes’ thinking time and the opportunity to cross-check previous stories and editorial guidelines can make all the difference to whether you are happy with your decision as a leader or kick yourself afterwards.”**

The diary reveals a consistent sense of the editor being thoughtful and patient, and driven by a keen professional sense of the public interest. The ethical principles of a commitment to accuracy, balance and impartiality infuse the reflections, seemingly reflecting the values that

the participant's employer, the BBC, places at the centre of its mission and guidelines. The corporation's reputation for impartiality and balance is more important than "chasing cheap headlines" (p5), and therefore there emerges an emphasis on taking time over a story rather than rushing to publish.

A defining characteristic of the diary is perhaps caution. In an era when there is frequently a race to be the first to post sports news online, November's reflections appear to underscore the virtue of deliberation. As he states in his final entry: "This, probably more than any other story, highlighted the importance of taking some time even with a breaking story to think things through and ensuring you're happy with the tone of the content you're producing before hitting publish. In a fast-paced environment where everyone wants to be first, it can be easy to rush content out and then regret it afterwards. But even a couple of minutes' thinking time and the opportunity to cross-check previous stories and editorial guidelines can make all the difference to whether you are happy with your decision as a leader or kick yourself afterwards" (p10). Thoroughness is November's *modus operandi*, and the BBC's code – the Editorial Guidelines – is a component in that thoroughness.

While the idiom used by November is not explicitly deontological, the entries are permeated with a sense of how seriously he takes his professional responsibilities. Could this be a manifestation of the 'halo effect' or a manifestation of serious-minded ethical commitment? Given the consistency and depth, the latter seems more likely. This is not the diary of a superficial 'ball-watcher', but rather a sports editor with a commitment to covering the wider contextual stories of sport both thoroughly and ethically.

Importance is placed by November on his reporters providing patiently-gathered, well-researched interview content that is delivered without sensationalism. The off-diary time that he grants enables a strong story to be thoroughly investigated and published. Care is taken in the sourcing of stories and there is a reluctance to run speculative stories, and when on one occasion November does depart from the standard double-source principle it is clearly only after deep consideration.

Caution results in one article not being published out of a fear of action for defamation. There is a hint of self-censorship here, with November suggesting the story might have been pursued in more detail – and published – had it been about a club from a higher league (“It was after all a spat between a fifth-tier club and an agent and had it been a more high-profile case then we may have considered things differently” (p3)). Implicit here is the idea that, because the club is not towards the top of the football pyramid, the story is not worth taking any risks with, and can therefore be dropped.

November’s emphasis on thoroughness and care causes a flicker of frustration and annoyance at colleagues from BBC Radio when a story based on their reporting turns out to contain an inaccuracy. November, whose usual register is one of calm analysis, is clearly irked: “How much do you actually trust the copy of others, even within the same organisation? If a story is running on air, as it was in this case, you would imagine it has already gone through the relevant checks and balances in terms of standing it up. I wouldn’t want to stop trusting stories brought in by BBC local radio, but it may be that we need to consider doing our own further checks around the most high-profile and sensitive stories” (p1).

If trust in colleagues is one dimension to his diary, then trust in social media is another. Social platforms are double-edged for him, as they can be both a source of stories, but also platforms on which verification can be difficult: “Social media is an important tool in the news gathering process in this day and age but it doesn’t always tick all the checks and balances you should go through when producing a story” (p7).

### **5.3.2 Diary Two – Oscar**

**“It was horse-trading which left both parties satisfied and I got the exclusive I wanted.”**

The picture that emerges in the log is of the complexities involved in reporting in depth on a club that one is covering on a regular basis. Due to the closeness of the relationships that have developed between himself and the club, Oscar attempts to navigate a route that both keeps the club onside and which generates exclusive stories; in one instance he refers to this as “horse trading” (p6) with the club. There is a willingness to put certain material into the

public domain, even if that might upset contacts, if that is required to ensure the public has a full grasp of important issues affecting the club. The truth in such important stories has to trump the feelings of a contact (p3). However, there is also a clear sense in which Oscar on occasion assists the club when the club is caught off-guard. This, however, is not done at the expense of his own integrity as an independent sports journalist. One instance of this is where he effectively self-embargoes himself when a leading player surprises the club press officer in an interview with Oscar by effectively announcing his departure at the end of the season: “As the club had been taken by surprise and weren’t ready to announce the player was leaving, I felt it was only fair to give them the opportunity to pull something together. Along with the radio journalist, I embargoed myself for an hour to allow the club to get together a statement” (p4). Oscar did not have to do this, as the player had spoken to him on the record. Although Oscar does not say it himself, this itself is a form of “horse-trading”. By acting “fairly” with the club, Oscar is exhibiting behaviour which ensures the clubs remains positively disposed towards him, and this could help him remain on the inside track. From a strictly Kantian perspective, this arguably undermines Oscar’s autonomy, as he is to some extent bending his will to the club and thereby adopting the journalistic hypothetical imperative rather than the journalistic categorical imperative. However, such pragmatism does not equate to weak sports journalism as Oscar is aware of the need to flex his independence on some occasions; rather, it illustrates the complexities of covering the same club day in, day out as a beat reporter.

A strong sense of respecting the on-the-record/off-the-record distinction emerges, as well as a sense of anticipating when certain segments are off the record. In one instance, this leads to Oscar not naming certain players whom a coach names as having disappointed him during a season (“Although it wasn’t explicitly agreed, I sensed this was all off-the-record. I didn’t publish any details of that part of our conversation” (p1)). This is a form of self-censorship, where Oscar voluntarily edits out certain content, even though the coach could have had no cause for complaint if it had been included. When strong, controversial material is given off the record, Oscar suggests that he is simultaneously able to respect that yet also convey to readers the gist of the controversy through “subtle hints”: “The off-the-record quotes and detail was much more interesting than what could be printed. I tried to persuade the coach to put some of the off-the-record quotes onto the record, but he was a gent and didn't feel it

was worth publicly rocking the boat. I wrote up the interview based on what had been agreed, with a couple of subtle hints that all had not been right behind the scenes” (p6). This is another instance of Oscar negotiating the tightrope of breaking stories but keeping intact a good relationship with the club.

In the diary, Oscar’s only references to social media are two instances where he describes how he uses Twitter to directly contact players (p2 and p3). It reads like Twitter direct messages (DMs) have supplanted phone numbers as the principal way Oscar contacts players. It is noteworthy that Oscar does not give consideration to whether this constitutes an over-familiarity or a slight infringement of a player’s privacy.

A firm sense of ethics emerges in the diary through the adherence to embargoes and the protection of sources. Overall, there is a sense that ethical reasoning is infused into the journalist’s professional practice.

### 5.3.3 Diary Three – Papa

**“No reporter, particularly a freelancer, wants to offer up a tepid line to the desk which may lead to the desk questioning whether they should use them, yet I also felt a sense of duty to my contact at the club...”**

The thread that emerges in Papa’s transcript is of a freelancer constantly negotiating the tightrope of preserving his relationships with both the sports desks he works for and the PR departments of the clubs he covers. This is encapsulated by his reflection that: “I felt this achieved sufficient balance to satisfy both [REDACTED] with the focus on the positives in the present with a nod to their previous struggles” (p3). He goes to considerable lengths to keep clubs’ media departments happy, suggesting he appreciates just how important it is as a freelancer in need of club access to have those positive relationships: “I sent a copy of the published piece to the club media department afterwards and they were grateful for the publicity and liked the way the story had been addressed, so this felt like a ‘win, win’ situation” (p4). Keeping clubs satisfied appears to be

of equal importance – if not more importance – than keeping sports editors satisfied. This goes as far as Papa expressing that he has a “duty” to contacts at clubs: “No reporter, particularly a freelancer, wants to offer up a tepid line to the desk which may lead to the desk questioning whether they should use them, yet I also felt a sense of duty to my contact at the club who had granted the access to the player and provided a series of exclusive interviews throughout the previous season which had provided numerous other published stories” (p6). The intros to articles are sometimes not as ‘hard hitting’ as they could be due to Papa’s concerns at keeping clubs’ PR departments on side. By admitting to a sense of “duty” towards his contacts in the PR department at a club, Papa arguably displays a form of journalistic heteronomy – a surrendering of his own independence to the gatekeepers who regulate access to players. This pragmatism is, however, arguably canny and necessary freelance journalism practice as it keeps sports clubs very much on Papa’s side, facilitating his job as a freelancer.

The establishing and maintenance of trust is regarded by Papa as central to his goal of keeping relationships intact, even if the sports desks and clubs pull in different directions. For the sake of preserving his often hard-won relationships with sources, Papa takes a firm, non-negotiable line with himself on comments made off the record: “Off-record views were expressed. To protect the source this was left out of the story. My own approach tends to be a cautious one in these instances. Building contacts to a point where they will trust you with sensitive information can take years. Without doubt, it is one of the hardest parts of the job. Therefore, my view has always been to fully respect and adhere to the wishes of a contact in terms of how information they provide is dealt with” (p3). There is a consistent streak of circumspection in Papa’s approach, perhaps surprising given his work for tabloids.

The sense of Papa being a freelancer slightly on the fringe at times emerges, both in terms of job/work security, and the challenges of reporting alongside staff reporters at press conferences. There is an undertow of anxiety in Papa’s closing remarks as he considers the challenge as a freelancer of “future-proofing” himself (p7).

### 5.3.4 Synthesis of IPA Diaries

#### 5.3.4.1 *Research Objective One: Self-Censorship (and Duty)*

November, Oscar and Papa all make decisions that significantly change the flow of information that is released into the public realm through the application of self-censorship. Papa describes how a “sense of duty” to a club contact prompts him to tone down the top line of an article that he submits to his desk; Oscar does not publish the names of players a coach tells him have disappointed him, and self-embargoes another angle he gets in order to give the club time to respond; and legal fears prompt November to back away from publication. Indeed, a commitment to duty, implicitly or explicitly, emerges as a characteristic contained in all three diaries. November is a sports editor who evinces a strong sense of responsibility in complying with the BBC’s Editorial Guidelines and fulfilling the corporation’s values. Oscar illustrates a thoroughgoing fair-mindedness in his dealings with contacts but in one instance emphasises how he will not let the feelings of a contact inhibit the publication of information that he thinks it is effectively his duty to release to supporters. Papa writes of duty that operates in the other direction: of a “sense of duty” to a club contact. Oscar’s and Papa’s duties may pull in opposite directions, but the deontological idiom is shared by both.

#### 5.3.4.2 *Research Objective Two: Ethics (and Duties)*

All diaries share a sense of being kept by thoughtful, ethically engaged sports journalists who have an appreciation of the responsibilities that come with their respective roles. Their decisions appear to often be motivated through principle, and a sense of careful deliberation is apparent. The trope of ‘toy department’ sports journalism, so often invoked down the decades (Anderson, 1973; Boyle, 2006b; Boyle, Rowe and Whannel, 2010; Bradshaw and Minogue, 2020; Hardin, Zhong and Whiteside, 2009; McEnnis, 2018b) is challenged by much of their considered entries. In their reflections on off-the-record and embargoed information, for example, Oscar and Papa are firm in their adherence to respecting them (and perhaps, in Oscar’s case, at times go further than what is ethically required), while November’s log is infused with a sense of him taking very seriously the BBC’s core values, such as accuracy, balance and impartiality – the “traditional” journalistic values (Preston, 2009). There is a



preponderance of professional pragmatism in Oscar and Papa's diaries, with the two of them exercising the *hypothetical journalistic imperative* of taking practical editorial decisions that facilitate the maintenance of contacts on their respective beats and thereby protect the flow of stories. However, this is not to say that their approach can be dismissed as unethical. Indeed, what pervades all three diaries is a general sense of fair-mindedness. This spirit animates November's log, and a strong example is provided by Oscar when he describes how he self-embargoes himself. These are not the writings of journalists who could be easily dismissed as 'fans with typewriters'. Rather, they are the thoughts of reflective sports journalists who take their job seriously and are attuned to the ethical and editorial complexities that can arise in the course of it, although, as with any IPA, this cannot be generalised and said to apply to the UK sports journalist population at large. The thoughtfulness and deliberation that is illustrated potentially reflects the type of journalists who would agree to be participants in such a study, which requires a substantial commitment of their time and which might naturally appeal to more reflective practitioners. Still, the sample of diary-keepers illustrates that there are exponents of sports journalism who discharge the kind of ethical reasoning that Harcup enjoins journalists generally to show: "to be reflective practitioners, engaged in a constant process of reflection and learning while doing their job" (Harcup, 2007: 144).

#### *5.3.4.3 Research Objective Three: Codes of Conduct*

There is a marked difference between November's attitude to codes and Oscar's and Papa's. The presence and relevance of the BBC Editorial Guidelines to November's practice is apparent, while neither Oscar nor Papa refer to a code during the course of their entries. This could be because (unlike November) they did not have any particularly testing ethical issues to negotiate during the course of their participation that required reference to the Editors' Code of Practice, or it could be that codes simply do not register on their radar during daily practice.

What is notable here is that Oscar and Papa still make complicated and nuanced ethical and editorial judgements, despite not mentioning codes. This suggests the inadequacy of regulation in and of itself to stimulate ethical behaviour (Cairns, 2018; Luckhurst and Phippen,

2014). Indeed, it could be tentatively suggested on the basis of their two diaries that not only is a code of practice not a sufficient condition for ethical behaviour by sports journalists, it is not a necessary condition.

#### *5.3.4.4 Research Objective Four: Lived Experience and Professional Identity*

All three dairies convey a sense of concern with relationships. For Oscar and Papa, the primary relationships they are concerned about are the relationships they have with the clubs they are reporting on. This reflects the demands that face Oscar as a local reporter covering one club in great depth, and the demands that face Papa as a freelancer who fears that the supply of interview opportunities (and therefore income) could be cut off if clubs' PR departments are alienated. To this extent, they are both continually negotiating the tightrope of getting too close to the "circus" (Boyle, 2006b). For November, the key relationships are with colleagues at the BBC – both the reporters underneath him whom he wants to get the best out of, and colleagues at other branches of the corporation whose reliability he needs to be assured of. As with duties, the participants' relationships may sometimes pull in different directions, but there is a shared sense of their importance.

Social media occurs in the reflections of November and Oscar but for different reasons. It is a double-edged newsgathering mechanism for November (rather as it is for Cairns (2018)), and a means of contacting players for Oscar. The absence of social media in Papa's entries is made to feel striking by both its presence in the other diaries and by the widespread acknowledgement in the literature of social media's pervasiveness in the new digital media paradigm (English, 2016; Roberts and Emmons, 2016; Sheffer and Schultz, 2010).

A concern with – and an appreciation of the importance of – off-diary content also emerges in the diaries. November is keen to ensure his reporters have time to gather items that require additional research, Oscar holds numerous informal off-diary discussions with key contacts, while Papa's entries create the sense of a freelancer generally roaming free and using his wits to generate off-diary ideas. Unique to Papa, though, is an occasional sense of professional anxiety at what the future holds for him as a freelancer.

## 5.4 Overall IPA Synthesis

Extrapolating firm general conclusions from IPA is methodologically illegitimate due to its idiographic nature, but some themes that emerge across both the interview-based IPA and diary-based IPA can be distilled as follows:

- Self-censorship is a widespread phenomenon in sports journalism which can compromise the flow of facts and inhibit the expression of honestly-held opinion. There is a multiplicity of reasons behind acts of self-censorship in the sports media
- The duties that sports journalists regard themselves as having are varied and in some instances inconsistent and contradictory. Some perceived duties can, perhaps paradoxically, inhibit truth-telling
- Social media has altered the flow of sports media content in myriad, complex ways, in some instances improving quality by motivating sports journalists to raise their standards, but in others contaminating – or even corrupting – the flow of content. Social media has transformed the practice of sports journalists, and with that has come new ethical issues, or in some instances old ethical issues in new guises. These issues range from dealing with abuse to self-censorship and verification
- Editors are considerably more concerned with codes of practice than reporters, with codes barely registering in the thinking of many in the latter group. November and Iota, the two most senior editors, show emphatic concern for codes. Among reporters the sense that someone higher up the editorial hierarchy will protect them recurs, while other reporters do not refer to codes at all
- Nurturing and sustaining relationships is a common preoccupation, and the digital revolution – particularly social media – has complicated the nature of sports journalists' relationships. This feeds into the emergence of a new sense of professional identity as fans have become less remote and clubs have evolved into more like media rivals
- The tropes of sports journalists as 'fans with typewriters', 'cheerleaders' and members of the newsroom 'toy department' appear to be hackneyed, simplistic and of little relevance in capturing the nature and nuance of contemporary sports journalism.

There are some marked differences between the interview data and the diary data. In the diaries there is a far greater sense of sports journalists getting – or making – the opportunity to go off-diary in pursuit of original stories. By contrast, the interviews are dominated by a sense that time pressures mean there is precious little opportunity to get off the diary. Another difference lies in the levels of emotion contained in the two data sets. While the interviews capture a gamut of emotions – from a Kantian perfectionism to a sense of incipient breakdown – the expression and range of emotions in the diaries is considerably more limited.

### **5.5: Autoethnography: Findings and Analysis**

The two autoethnographic logs and the distillation of the themes that arise in them are contained in Appendix 5. The Two-and-Half-Year Autoethnographic Log (TAL) is Appendix 5a, the Rugby World Cup Autoethnographic Log (RWC) is Appendix 5b, and the Colour-Coded Autoethnographic Distillation is Appendix 5c.

#### *5.5.1 Research Objective One – Self-Censorship and Compromised Flows of Information*

Self-censorship is a key strand of my AE, and I am struck at how closely self-censorship is connected in my log to my reflections on my relationships with my sources – a theme that had been articulated to some extent by Sefiha (2010). For example, I debate with myself whether non-professional, social media relationships with contacts (e.g. being ‘friends’ with them on Facebook) could trigger self-censorship in the future, due to my virtual friendship inhibiting the way I report on the contact’s club. I capture my sense of unease: “This issue reflects the grey area between the professional and the personal that the digital era with its multi-purpose social media platforms throws up” (TAL, p14). This is one way in which social media poses me a challenge.

Relatedly, I explore how friendships with people close to the sport I am covering can pose moral dilemmas about whether to publish or not publish. I capture the self-censorship – but also the sense of dilemma – as I describe a situation in which I was made aware of a Premiership player’s career-ending injury through a mutual friend two weeks before a press

release was issued by the club: “Rather than writing a piece about it, I respected the confidence (even though it wasn’t explicitly stated by my friend that it was confidential). But this was as much about maintaining my friendship as sitting on a story. To have published a piece about this would have probably ruined a friendship. But would the situation have been different if it had been a current international who was being forced to retire, rather than a 34-year-old club player? Would I have felt conflicted? I believe so – because the journalist core in me always wants to get the big story out there and be the first with it. This is a commendable professional drive and all good journalists need it, but it needs to be tempered, otherwise the drive to get an exclusive becomes the altar on which all sorts of (far more) important things can become sacrificed” (TAL, p16). The dynamics of self-censorship are complex, and can function at the interface of the professional and the personal.

In my log I develop the idea of self-censorship through euphemism, with the euphemisms being used for the sake of preserving contacts (TAL, p8). I capture too my sense of using euphemism in match reporting. Covering a match in the pool stages of the World Cup: “I drafted an initial match report in which I was highly critical of the player, but then toned down the criticism and made it less directly about him. Why? On re-reading, I felt it was too brutal, and I did consider the player’s feelings – and the fact he was young did influence me; rightly or wrongly, I think criticism can be more damaging to someone at the very start of their international career than a more established player. I considered, too, the fact that to go guns blazing in my first match report could cause ripples of acrimony between me and the nation’s media manager. However, I wanted my criticism to be conveyed. As such, it was toned down but the point remained. This felt like mild self-censorship but one which didn’t significantly compromise me: I was still voicing my view, just in a moderated fashion. Neither cheerleader nor assassin, I was somewhere in between” (RWC, p2). On reflection, being “neither cheerleader nor assassin” strikes me as a useful principle for match reporting.

Echoing Sugden and Tomlinson (2007) and Boyle (2006a and 2006b), I am preoccupied at times in my AE with whether I am too close to my subjects to be able to report successfully. The sense is conveyed of how in my early days as a sports journalist I oscillated between being something of a “fellow traveller” with the club I was covering and “putting the boot in” (TAL, p1). This is one instance of the closeness-distance conundrum that sports journalists need to

negotiate with their subjects. I note how, in the digital age, social media interactions can foster that closeness (TAL, p1). Getting 'too close' to those I am reporting on surfaces elsewhere, when I consider the issues arising from participating in a social five-a-side football match arranged by a national side's management team (RWC, p3-4). Reflecting on this, while reporters have a duty not to be so close to a subject or team that it leads to a form of preferential treatment, the closeness-distance conundrum does not admit of straightforward categorical prescriptions. There is no list of Kantian-style imperatives that relate to what is and is not permissible in terms of spending time with a potential source or subject. Rather, their needs to be an individual alertness to each interaction, each involvement and each invitation.

This last point is captured in an entry where I consider my relationship with sponsors, and whether it could cause my journalism to be unduly softened and stray into complicity. Considering an offer from Mastercard to watch England versus New Zealand from the Mastercard suite at the Yokohama Stadium, I conclude that to accept the offer would not necessarily be compromising, provided that I remain alert to the potential dangers of such hospitality. My reasoning is rather tortuous: "Clearly, the invitation is an exciting one. But as a journalist one has to be wary of becoming too cosy with the sponsors, although in fairness such closeness could facilitate future player access, which in turn could lead to interesting articles. If you are cosy with a sponsor, you are several degrees closer to the corporate powers running the tournament. And if you are receiving hospitality from the sponsor, then your ability to report independently on the tournament is potentially undermined. So the relationship with companies like Mastercard and their PRs is double-edged. It could facilitate player interview access that I otherwise wouldn't get, which could lead to fans receiving fresh insights. But it could also draw me into the rugby circus, rather than reporting objectively on that circus. It is important to be cognisant of the tension when interacting with such companies" (RWC, p7-8). As well as echoing Boyle (2006a and 2006b), this passage is slightly reminiscent of the David Walsh case study in Chapter 2, particularly Walsh's passages in which he seeks to justify his time embedded with Team Sky. Both Walsh and I are effectively protesting our cognisance of the potential conflict, with that cognisance then allegedly serving to protect the purity of our journalism. This can be distilled down to the issue of

whether the flow of information arising from the reporting situation is in some way compromised or not, an issue that I return to elsewhere in the AE.

The flow of information from interviewee to interviewer to media platform is not always a pure one, as an entry from August 2018 encapsulates. It is worth inserting in full, as it conveys the complexities and quandaries in truth-telling that can arise from a standard press opportunity: “[a player] who I had got to know well over the course of the past decade, spoke to me immediately after I had turned off the microphone to give me – unrequested – a number of less than complimentary opinions about how his former club, ██████████, was being run. In particular, he referred to how non-disclosure agreements were being used to prevent players and coaches from being able to speak out after they had been sacked – or ‘released early’ – from their contracts. This contrasted with the relatively middle of the road, inoffensive comments he had made during the on-the-record interview about how he was looking forward to returning to his former club for the second game of the season. In particular, ██████████ referred to how one ██████████ player, a former captain, had been, in his opinion, poorly treated. The player had been released from his contract a number of weeks earlier, said ██████████, but the club had still not announced it. ██████████’s comments were clearly made to me off-the-record and in confidence, but they raised two issues. Firstly, they contrasted in both content and tone to the answers he had given when the microphone was running, and, secondly, they were clearly remarks of public interest (season ticket holders at ██████████, for example, could make a strong case that they should be privy to such information when they pay substantial amounts of money each season to help finance the club) that I was now in possession of – what should I do with them? Publishing them would have felt like a breach of trust to ██████████, and I did not – and would not – reveal them in a story. But what about me perpetrating a breach of trust to the club’s supporters, who look at titles I work for and have worked for as a source of reliable information about their club? A conclusion that is not too hard to draw is that much of the content in sports journalism is something of a charade: a player delivers an on-the-record interview at a media day and doesn’t deliver the whole truth; a journalist, who is then taken into the player’s confidence following the interview, then respects the player’s confidence and doesn’t touch the subject that has been revealed off-the-record – or at least not immediately. It is like another form of non-disclosure agreement. It is not encapsulated in a series of clauses in a legal document,

but is an unspoken and unwritten rule that is the backdrop to the interaction between journalist and player. It feels like a type of systemic form of informal censorship, and it can be dispiriting to think about, as it can feel duplicitous to the audience and rather like I'm staying on the surface of things" (TAL, p32-33). My angst here clearly derives from concern at the ethics of running relatively bland on-the-record comments when I know the interviewee's true view (expressed off-the-record) is very different; there is a concern that I am somehow being complicit in a concealment. A standard quotes-based match preview story, as this example illustrates, can be far more complicated than it appears. My reasoning is conflicted between a duty to the player and duty to the truth/audience. Complying with the *journalistic categorical imperative* of truth-telling is not a simple matter.

Interview access itself is something that is also more complex than it perhaps seems to a reader, as I reflect elsewhere on the conditions attached by PR agents (e.g. the mentioning of a brand that the interviewee is an 'ambassador' for) in return for access: "The flow of information from you as a sports journalist is compromised by you becoming complicit in a brand's commercial objectives. From a more practical and pragmatic perspective, however, it is perhaps just a way to secure access to players who are increasingly hidden by their clubs anyway... this issues boils down to: at what price player access?" (TAL, p21). Another instance of quotes not necessarily being what they seem is a journalist admitting to me that he had made up quotes with the express approval of two international sportsmen. This was at their request so they did not have to put time aside to be interviewed: "The journalist explained that he had gone along with this, and suggested the arrangement had come in handy when the publication he worked for at the time was short of stories. It was quite an admission that left me wondering at the gap between what is true and what is published, and how wide that gap can be if journalists are wilfully stretching it through such agreements" (RWC, p2). To repeat the idea at the start of the preceding paragraph: the flow of information from interviewee to interviewer to media platform is not always a pure one.

In a passage consonant with Grimmer's account of media management censorship (2017), my AE reflections give instances of PR management techniques by teams and tournament organisers which have felt like attempts to muffle or marginalise me and other journalists



(TAL, p17-18; RWC, p5), but securing the intervention of the Rugby Writers' Club and my own resourcefulness (TAL, p19; RWC, p7) served to overcome or dilute these attempts.

The theme of compromised information flows comes up again in my consideration of embargoes that journalists place – supposedly collectively – on the release of certain interview pieces: “Does embargoing have a potentially distorting effect on the flow of information; whether it is a form of – if not self-censorship – then at least artificial postponement that in some sense blocks the flow of sports news to the detriment of the reader/audiences? In what way is it in the public's interest that such embargoing occurs? If journalism is about the accurate and timely distribution of information, then self-imposed embargoes would seem to be *prima facie* a corruption of that, all for the sake of journalistic self-protection. This could especially be the case if it is one journalist pushing – and ultimately persuading others to agree to – the imposition of an embargo which is not necessarily in the interests of the other journalists present” (TAL, p28).

If it can sometimes be just one journalist who pushes for an embargo and prevails (TAL, p29), then – as Boyle (20017) suggests – there are also cases in which the pack of journalists functions as a collective. This struck me during the Rugby World Cup in Japan, where I sensed that – unwittingly – the pack was collectively making corporate news value decisions: “Following a match, the division of labour among the pack of journalists covering a specific nation was striking. This division primarily focused on the process of the pooling of interview transcriptions and the pack's self-embargoing of articles based on those interviews. The journalists emailed transcriptions of interviews to one another and then verbally – and sometimes in text [message or email] – discussed and agreed on what time each interview piece could be published from. This, traditionally, is to ensure no-one looks silly by being ‘beaten’ to a story by a rival title, while also keeping the sports desk back home happy by there being a steady supply of items. This practice was particularly marked with this certain group of journalists, who would often make editorial judgements on behalf of the rest of the pack (e.g. “I've just emailed the quotes from x, if anyone's desperate. It's for Monday-for-Tuesday publication: not before 10pm on Monday”). Editorial judgements around newsworthiness [“if anyone's desperate”] therefore became, in a sense, corporate. The flow of information was thus internally regulated by the pack; it was not self-censorship as such,

but there was certainly self-regulation of the flow of information by the pack. The journalistic pack, it seems to me, takes on a significance greater than the sum of its parts, sculpting the flow of future information” (RWC, p4). This, I think, serves as an arresting account of the self-policing and collective decision-making that can occur among sports journalists.

### *5.5.2 Research Objective Two – Ethics*

The primary ethical concern in the reflections relates to compromised information flows – a topic that is closely connected with self-censorship, hence its incorporation into the section above. Another ethical issue – how to deal with social media abuse – is discussed in section 5.5.4 below. This highlights how a number of the research objectives overlap and cohere.

The fragility of my moral autonomy as a freelancer emerges strikingly in one instance (TAL, p10-11). Here, I convey the sense that an editor’s insistence that I refer to eye-gouging claims in the course of an on-the-whistle match report – despite not having had a chance to see the footage myself purporting to show gouging – had left me feeling like a “hack”. As the AE describes, I sought to mitigate the sense of being a hired hack by putting the claim lower down the copy than requested, but the experience slightly eroded my sense of autonomous agency. This, and another instance covered in the same entry, are examples of ideals coming into contact with the real world of tight deadlines and the desk wanting a hard angle.

One ethical issue that arises in the AE is the issue of unethical behaviour by one journalist towards others. Long tours can lead to rising tempers, and an unpleasant row was conducted over a WhatsApp group by three journalists during my time covering the Rugby World Cup. The row focused on accusations from two of the journalists that the third had effectively gone behind their back in pursuit of a story that left the other two compromised. As I reflected at the time: “While camaraderie is the predominant state of affairs, tensions inevitably arise around news-gathering methods and also, I feel, around who is the pre-eminent senior journalist: the king of the pack, the alpha sports journalist. The journalists’ team being knocked out of the tournament seemed to be the catalyst for those tensions coming to the boil” (RWC, p7). Behaviour such as this is not frequent but nor is it isolated. In the late 2000s,

I witnessed physical violence in a press box, when two writers took half-hearted swings at one another. This, again, seemed to have been a case of simmering dislike boiling over.

### *5.5.3 Research Objective Three: Codes of Conduct*

One of the most striking feature of the two strands of my AE is how, despite being infused with a sense of ethical concern, there is no explicit mention of specific codes of practice. At one point I do make a general reference to codes and write of being wary of reporting in such a way as to potentially intrude into grief (TAL, p37), but this is done without a direct mention of the Editors' Code of Practice or the IMPRESS Standards Code. This, I feel, reflects my emerging perspective – echoing Cairns (2018) and Luckhurst and Phippen (2014) – that an awareness and understanding of codes is not a sufficient condition for ethical behaviour by sports journalists and, indeed, may not even be a necessary condition. Luckhurst and Phippen contend that the application of “values” rather than “rules” is what is needed in order for a journalist's involvement in his industry to be described as ethical. To me, it seems that codes are important in so far as the rules contained within them stimulate ethical reasoning and values, but the absence of – or lack of engagement with – rules does not preclude the development or application of values.

### *5.5.4 Research Objective Four – Lived Experience and Professional Identity*

Keeping the AE logs made me realise how my work as a sports journalist is bound up with my sense of personal identity as much as my professional identity. The rhythm of freelance work forms a central aspect of my sense of personal identity; this is something I seek to explain in an entry from February 2019 when describing the sense of fulfilment that a weekend's freelancing brought me having been away from work for some time due to my father's illness: “It's not that I regard my freelance sports journalism as a drug upon which I have a dependence, but it is certainly the case that such work has helped bring a rhythm and order to my life, perhaps in contrast to the broken rhythms and relative disorder in other aspects of life in the past three years. To this extent it might be considered a form of fantasy, or escape – perhaps sports match reporting (to take the 'toy department' tag) has become a comforting toy for me to turn to and play with when other things seem less predictable or scheduled”

(TAL, p35). Later on in that same year, the “comforting toy” evolves into something more like a means to professional exhilaration. Covering the Rugby World Cup, I wrote an entry on 12 October 2019 following my heaviest day’s workload. It felt like a day that was personally defining as well as professionally defining: “I felt a sharper sense of professional obligation on this evening of intense work. It was the evening which I always knew was going to be my busiest of the tournament, and in that sense it felt to me like a defining day of my own World Cup experience. Because of my exposure through multiple national platforms and on a world stage, I felt an intense awareness of ensuring I got things absolutely right in my work. I felt on my mettle, and I felt an adrenaline rush from the moment I woke up to the moment I went, exhausted, to bed. While demanding, it is professionally invigorating. I haven’t felt as professionally alive for as long as I can remember, or as alive in a general sense” (RWC, p6). Writing this section up is actually a powerful experience, as it evokes the memories and feelings of that fulfilling day – everything from the breeze at the ground to the ride on the media bus back to the hotel. Reflecting now, the use of the term “professional obligation” suggests it was my sense of duty that actually stimulated the sense of excitement – my duty to myself not to let myself down, and duty to the titles that had commissioned me. It is notable that, for me, the fulfilment of duties appears to translate into a sense of personal fulfilment. The overlap of professional and personal emotion resonates with the Chapter 2 case study, where David Walsh reflects on the emotional stakes involved in deciding to embed himself with Team Sky: “If Team Sky was all that Dave Brailsford said it was, then the time spent with them would refresh the palate and flush the bad taste left by the Lance years. In truth, I was keen to fall in love with the sport again. On the other hand there was the fear of disappointment. Finding or even suspecting that Brailsford was running the cycling equivalent of a speakeasy presented no journalistic difficulties, but personally to see the sport screwing its people all over again would have been too much” (Walsh, 2013: 322).

Elsewhere, there is a sense of my work as a multi-platform sports journalist causing me stress. There is pressure arising from working on multiple platforms – radio commentary and written match reports – on the same night: “This tension partly arises through me being a self-consciously multimedia freelance journalist – I like to market myself as a sports journalist who works ‘in print, on air, online’. But this poses problems when requests for match coverage come in for more than one medium” (TAL, p9-10). Despite the pressure it causes, I was – and

am – reluctant to turn down such work as a freelancer lest I slip down the pecking order of freelancers that organisations use.

Steen has written of social media stimulating a cult of personality among sports journalists (2014: 43), and social media is something that I describe as using in order to “promote my online brand” (TAL, p7), although in my log I tie myself up in some knots over the way I project myself. Having selected an image for Instagram from a pre-season media day I had attended, I reflect: “I felt it captured two things; firstly, that I was in control of the interview but relaxed and, secondly, that my subject was at ease – preconditions, generally, for a successful interview. With the new season about to start, it also occurred to me that it would do my ‘online brand’ no harm if I published a photo of me at work ahead of the new season, so... I distributed the image on my Instagram account with the caption above. Should such a caption contain the handle for the club (@officialgloucesterrugby) or is that again a bit too ‘cosy’. Am I in danger of appearing like a club lackey?” (TAL, p7-8). Evident here is a form of what might be termed ‘Insta-angst’ – how am I coming across in this image? Later in the log, I refer to the way in which sports journalists are able to project a persona through social media and, building on Sheffer and Schultz (2010), how social media has facilitated a new interactivity with fans. With that has come online abuse. I take up this point, and end up half-proposing the idea that as part of ethics training sports journalists should receive more specific training in how to deal with trolls: “Personally, while I make a point of responding to sports fans who constructively reply to my tweets, I can’t remember having ever engaged with any fans who have spoken personally or aggressively to me – it is a case of ignoring them. However, the issue of receiving abusive messages has not been a significant one for me, partially because – having spoken to other sports journalists – it seems to be football journalists who bear the brunt. With the issue in my mind, I mentioned the issue to one football journalist with a huge six-figure following on social media and he spoke of the need to have a thick skin in order to ignore the welter of abusively critical messages that often come his way. A female sports journalist specialising in football told me of the horrific abuse she has received, including abuse based on her ethnicity. Again, she prescribed a thick skin. However, a thick skin is not always easily acquired and comes easier to some than others; how to deal with trolls would seem to be an important element of a football journalist’s ethics training. It is also worth noting that not all sports journalists take the same tack with abusive readers and trolls. While

some adopt the ‘thick skin and ignore’ approach, others I know seek to take the critics on by replying with put downs that are often infused with irony.... News organisations have trained their employees over social media use; I have attended such training by the BBC. But should sports desks seek to issue more detailed advice and guidance about responding to social media-based calumny and abuse? Is there scope for it to be incorporated into a code(s)? (TAL, p34). This final point serves to highlight the interconnectedness of the research objectives, with points of ethics, lived experience and codes all being incorporated into a tentatively expressed proposal.

## **5.6 Summary of Findings and Analysis**

This section triangulates the data gathered through IPA and AE, as well as synthesising points first made in the Chapter 2 case study. The deontological conceptual framework continues to be used, while additional philosophical concepts are invoked where necessary to facilitate an enriched, deeper synthesis. The research objectives are taken in turn, but first a more general epistemological point is articulated around what the data suggests about the nature of truth and falsity in sports journalism.

### *5.6.1 Compromised Information Flows – The Continuum of Untruth*

What emerges in both the IPA and AE data is the slipperiness of truth and accuracy. This is relevant to research objectives RO1-RO3. There are admissions of on-the-record content being published when sports journalists are aware of it conflicting with an interviewee’s off-the-record stance (Epsilon; TAL); of sports journalists publishing ghost-written fabricated opinion that has not been approved (Zeta); of sports journalists taking angles on stories which may not get to the heart of an issue but which the writer feels will be well received on social media (Iota, Alpha); of sports stars reportedly giving a journalist permission to “make up” quotes on their behalf (RWC); of sports journalists publishing speculative stories which they know will not come to pass, or of colleagues reportedly making up stories out of financial desperation (Zeta); of a journalist’s honest opinions on an issue being deliberately withheld (Kappa); of time constraints in the digital era limiting the number of sources that can be consulted for a story and a consequent impoverishment of the story’s breadth (Eta); and of

sports editors on a quality title being reportedly content for a correspondent to submit a piece that is “70 per cent” (Theta). It is not as simple as saying  $x$  piece of sports journalism is true or  $y$  is false; a piece might be true as far as it goes (in terms of reliably conveying the remarks given to a journalist by interviewees) but only give the partial truth. There are, in a sense, gradations of truth and falsity, with sports journalists – even those with high standards – delivering content which to varying degrees extends across this spectrum. This could be referred to as a *continuum of untruth*. Such a continuum is in tension with the journalistic categorical imperative, which speaks in the pure, absolute language of a fundamental moral duty to truth-telling (Sanford Horner, 2015: 120). In philosophical terms, the continuum is effectively a rejection of the principle of bivalence: the law of logic that every statement has either one of two truth values, true or false. Sports journalism does not operate with a bivalent logic; the picture is murkier. Rather, it has, to borrow a term from philosophical logic, a many-valued logic (Haack, 1996: 204). This is not to say that the pure deontological ideal of truth-telling as a journalistic end in itself is without merit, but it is to suggest that the binary division between truth and falsehood that underpins a media deontology is simplistic when transposed to real-world scenarios.

#### 5.6.2 Research Objective One – Self-Censorship

Self-censorship is prevalent in the data. The threads of self-censorship in sports journalism that emerge in the David Walsh case study are elaborated upon and fresh ones identified and explored. Self-censorship appears in various guises through both strands of IPA, with a taxonomy provided towards the end of the IPA Interviews section. Forms of self-censorship are explored in detail in both the IPA Diaries and autoethnography sections too, for example self-censorship through euphemism (Papa; YAL). Self-censorship can appear in many forms, from match reporting (RWC) and online comment (Alpha, Kappa) to self-censorship as a means of protecting the subjects of stories from abuse (Delta). Self-censorship feeds directly into the *continuum of untruth* described at the start of this Summary section, as it serves to corrupt the flow of sports news information and opinion. Self-censorship in sports journalism is a phenomenon that has been intensified by the advent and evolution of social media (Alpha, Iota, Kappa; YAL).

Based on the research, self-censorship is a pervasive factor in sports journalism in the digital age, and – as Steel says of censorship more generally: “It exists, dynamic, fluid, sometimes opaque yet powerful nevertheless” (2012: 4).

### *5.6.3 Research Objective Two – Ethics*

Different parts of the data reveal different ethical preoccupations that are specific to certain participants, for example racial representation (Iota), insider betting (Eta) and the behaviours of journalists jostling for their place in the pack pecking order (RWC), but there are themes that emerge across the different methods. Developing the issue of “abuse and insults” on Twitter discussed in the case study (Walsh, 2013: 207), both IPA and AE yield insights into the online criticism and mistreatment that sports journalists receive on social media. A “thick skin” is the common prescription for dealing with the abuse from online trolls (Alpha, Beta, Eta, Zeta; TAL), and this issue is revisited in the next chapter, which contains recommendations for industry.

The data shows that the handling of abuse is just one ethical issue to have arisen for sports journalists in the age of social media. Social platforms often emerges as a boon and a burden: in the same breath they can be regarded as an important newsgathering tool but also a platform on which verification is difficult (November; TAL). Social media can be used to communicate directly with players and club sources, but this can raises issues around impartiality and privacy (Oscar; TAL). One of its most positive functions is to raise the standard of some journalists’ output through online audience scrutiny (Theta, Beta), but at its worst it can be platform for grotesque distortion (Kappa) and corrupt sports journalists’ decision-making processes (Iota, Alpha). Social media is a platform for brand-building by sports journalists (Gamma, Iota, Kappa; TAL), echoing Steen’s claim that social media fuels a “cult of the personality” among journalists in which the social media platform turns the writer into both the publisher and the product (Steen, 2014: 43).

Redolent of Grimmer (2017) is the repeated view that clubs and competition organisers are increasingly seeking to “sanitise” content, which they do through a blend of producing their own digital material and restricting journalists’ access and/or questions, and this can make



truth-telling difficult (Beta, Gamma, Delta, Eta, Kappa; RWC); however, such barriers to truth can be overcome through innovative reporting (Zeta; RWC). The pressure to publish quickly in a social media age can also compromise the flow of rounded, in-depth stories, leading to superficial material being published (Eta). Truth-telling is a complicated phenomenon in sports journalism, and the web of duties that sports journalists feel complicates it further.

A multiplicity of duties emerges in the data. Duties can be in conflict, although journalists might voice no awareness of such conflicts (e.g. the duty to truth and accuracy, and the duty to protect the subjects of one's stories (Delta, Epsilon); and the duty to one's sports desk, and the sense of duty to one's club PR contacts (Papa)). A sense of duty to oneself and to one's employers emerges as a motivating factor to produce strong work and the associated feeling of personal fulfilment (Theta; RWC). While there are signs of some disordered thinking about duties in the IPA Interviews, what is notable about the IPA Diaries is the earnestness and depth with which the participants approach their reflections on duties and ethics more generally, a point that also applies to the AE. This is not the realm of Rowe's "toy department" (2005 and 2007). While the commitment to duties is expressed in more practical terms than absolute Kantian-Walshian terms, a sense of duties is a thread that runs through the data.

An additional dimension to sports journalism ethics that emerges in the research is the issue of sports journalists' poor behaviour to other sports journalists (Beta, Epsilon; RWC). Another finding is the denial of participation in, or awareness of, phone hacking on Fleet Street sports desks during the years immediately leading up to the Leveson Inquiry (Eta, Zeta, Theta, Iota).

#### *5.6.4 Research Objective Three – Codes of Conduct*

Emerging from the data is the sense that what Keeble calls the "collective conscience of a profession" (2009: 15) is perhaps for sports journalists contained more in self-policed unwritten rules than in a code of conduct. The "collective conscience" of the sports journalism industry is more tacit and subtle than an Editors' Code of Practice. Values are less tangible and explicit than clauses in a code. The external imperatives of a code are distinct from the internal imperatives that are created by the group dynamic (Alpha, Iota; RWC), and it is the latter which can yield more influence. The AE emphasises how self-policing and collective

decision-making occurs among sports journalists: “The journalistic pack, it seems to me, takes on a significance greater than the sum of its parts, sculpting the flow of future information” (RWC, p4). This builds on Boyle’s reference to the “group mentality of the journalistic pack that travels and works closely with its key sources” (Boyle 2017: 493), and chimes too with Iota describing the “unwritten rules” around editorial duties. Alpha also talks of “unwritten rules”, describing how the adherence to embargoes – and the ostracism that results from breaches – is one example of the self-policing dynamic. Self-regulation without recourse to codes could be one way of describing this phenomenon. Echoing Luckhurst and Phippen’s distinction between rules- and values-based systems of journalistic regulation (2014), the sense from the data is of sports journalism practice based on generally shared, implicitly acknowledged values rather than explicitly codified rules.

This is not, however, to adopt the position which says that codes “all have one thing in common: they are not worth the paper they are written on” (Norris, 2000: 325). While the research shows little awareness of, or application of, codes of practice (the majority of IPA participants regard codes as of marginal application, or effectively irrelevant, while the specifics of codes are not mentioned in the AE), there are notable exceptions. The most prominent exceptions are the two senior editors among the participants, with November illustrating a keen integration of the BBC’s Editorial Guidelines into his practice and Iota expressing a close engagement with both the Editors’ Code of Practice and his company’s internal code. Tentatively, it could be suggested that sports editors are significantly more concerned with codes/guidelines than reporters. Reporters and writers – even senior ones – convey the sense that codes are something for those higher up the hierarchy to attend to, and that those editors will protect them from code breaches (Beta, Delta, Theta). As such, while codes speak in the imperative register of deontology, elements of the data suggest that codes can arguably undermine autonomy by inhibiting the importance of individual moral agency. Rather than speaking of their own individual need and responsibility to understand and comply with codes, participants instead talk of those above them ensuring compliance. This, however, could be due to institutional factors within specific media organisations factors rather than a deficiency with journalism codes of practice *per se*.

Sanford Horner argues that journalism codes are undermined by a lack of understanding by the members of the profession (Sanford Horner, 2015: 228), and the data broadly supports this by suggesting that sports writers, as opposed to broadcasters, do not perceive their work as falling under the purview of a code. However, despite limited engagement with codes, there is general agreement in the data that it is important that some form of code is in place, even if it is very much in the background. This point is well-illustrated by Beta, who admits to not knowing whether his title is a signatory IPSO or IMPRESS but who nevertheless says it is important to have a code because otherwise it would be the “Wild West”. This, again, chimes with Sanford Horner, who argues that codes have their place because they remind journalists that “professional behaviour transcends technical concerns and competencies” (ibid.).

There is no suggestion in the data of an appetite for – or a perceived need by the participants for – a bespoke code of conduct for sports journalists, as proposed by Ramon-Vegas and Rojas-Torrijos (2018). The extent of disengagement with codes in their current form suggests that it would be difficult for another code to gain traction, unless it was constructed in a way that spoke directly and urgently to sports journalists of issues that arise in their standard practice. Any such new code, if it were to survive the acid test of standing up to real-life scenarios, would also have to give due consideration to the self-policing, pack dynamics described above.

#### *5.6.5 Research Objective Four: Lived Experience and Professional Identity*

The David Walsh case study in Chapter 2 captured how a sports journalist’s personal and professional emotions can overlap and blur (Walsh, 2013: 322), and the data offers additional instances of this. The sense of sports journalists’ personal involvement and emotional investment in their work is captured vividly in both IPA and AE (Theta, Eta; TAL, RWC), with professional work coming across as a personal achievement that bestows a sense of challenge, meaning and richness. Other emotions are less positive, with ennui, exhaustion and burnout occurring (Zeta, Kappa), and the AE also displaying some instances of self-doubt (TAL).

Elaborating on points made above in relation to RO2, social media has heralded an era in which sports journalists can project not only a persona on social platforms, but project too the views that they think will resonate with their followers or cause them to be noticed – it is seen by some as a “narcissistic endeavour” (Kappa) which serves to corrupt the independence of thought which is regarded as a cornerstone of journalistic identity (Iota). The Insta-angst phenomenon – whereby sports journalists seek to project the most positive professional image of themselves on social media – is captured in the AE (TAL).

As stated earlier in this chapter, the data shows sports journalism to be a multifarious professional activity, and the Wittgensteinian concept of family resemblance can be usefully deployed to help capture the diversity – and yet loose unity – of the different pursuits and registers that constitute contemporary sports journalism. The “distinction between the role of the critical, fourth estate watchdog and that of the ‘star struck’, even sycophantic fan” (Boyle, Rowe and Whannel, 2010; 249), rather than being a firm, binary categorisation, is one that requires gradations. A number of participants emphasise the need to embrace an element of fandom in their coverage, but this is not a crude form of ‘cheerleading’ but instead represents, in some instances, a form of adaptation to a new media ecosystem that has digital interactivity with supporters as a key element and which helps to ensure the longevity of beat sports journalism.

## **5.7 Challenges for the Project and Suggestions for Future Research**

The Methodology chapter outlined a number of steps that were taken to ensure the project was conducted ethically. While there are no concerns that the project deviated from being conducted ethically, in retrospect I feel provision should have been made to offer some form of emotional support to interviewees if they found the process of being interviewed in such depth particularly draining or upsetting. This point only came into focus following the final interview, with Kappa, where the subject expressed, on my interpretation, symptoms of burnout and a sense of professional frustration. This experience will inform my future research.

The methodology for the project, in keeping with the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, emphasised the need for me as the researcher to 'bracket' my own thinking on topics when conducting the interviews so as not to inhibit the flow and development of interviewees' own reflections. Detailed consideration was given in the Methodology to the process of how this could be done, given my dual role as a sports journalist and researcher. Reflecting on the interviewing process, the bracketing was in practice challenging to accomplish, not least when interviewees would actually refer to my role as a sports journalist in the course of their answers. However, having conducted the interviews and the entire research project reflexively, I have been aware of such tensions and am confident that it has not undermined the richness and penetration of the data. Indeed, my hunch is that many interviewees were more frank with me, and therefore gave me richer data, because of my 'insider' status.

The project is based on qualitative data that has delivered rich insights into the ethical issues facing contemporary UK sports journalists and the sense of what it is to be one of those journalists. Due to the nature of the methods used, however, firm generalisations have not been able to be inferred. As a next step, quantitative methods could be deployed on a larger sample in an attempt to capture how widespread some the phenomena and experiences detailed in this project are. For example, based on the varieties of self-censorship identified in this project, a survey could be compiled that asks sports journalists whether they believe they have ever self-censored in those various different ways. More generalised conclusions about the prevalence or otherwise of self-censorship and other ethical experiences could then be drawn.

A philosophical analysis of freedom of expression as it intersects with the ethical issues facing sports journalism would be valuable, but is beyond the scope of this thesis due to space constraints. This could be a particularly fruitful area to pursue given some of the issues around social media that this project has brought into focus.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

### *6.1 Summary*

The over-arching aim of this project has been to explore the major ethical issues experienced by British sports journalists in the course of their practice in the modern digital media landscape, with a particular focus on self-censorship, and to capture the lived professional experience of sports journalists in the digital era. Instances of fabrication, self-censorship, mistreatment of colleagues and a willingness to potentially hack phones in pursuit of a story have been revealed, but the data and analysis reveals a nuanced picture of contemporary sports journalists' behaviour and roles.

The thesis began with a case study into the work of the investigative journalist David Walsh, which was used to bring into focus the central ethical issues affecting the sports journalism industry. A Kantian theoretical perspective was articulated and developed, leading to the gathering of qualitative data using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (interviews and diaries), and autoethnography. Enhanced by a Kantian philosophical analysis, these methods were used to provide an original analysis of the research objectives.

Specifically, the project's research objectives have been:

RO1) To understand the extent to which sports journalists self-censor and how this could compromise their journalistic activity.

RO2) To identify and examine common ethical challenges experienced by British sports journalists in the course of their professional work in the modern digital media landscape.

RO3) To explore the relevance and impact of codes of conduct on sports journalists' practice.

RO4) To capture the lived professional experience of modern sports journalists in the UK in the digital era and the implications of this for sports journalists' professional identity.

In the process of meeting these objectives, the thesis has built on academics' and editors' articulation of the complex ethical and professional challenges faced by contemporary sports journalists in an industry affected by the evolving digital media eco-system (Boyle, 2017; Cairns, 2018; Hutchins and Boyle, 2017). In particular, it has developed the research done on sports journalists' relationship with their sources and subjects (Boyle, 2006a and 2006b; Hardin, Zhong and Whiteside, 2009; Sefiha, 2010; Sugden and Tomlinson, 2007) to bring into sharp relief the currents of self-censorship that swirl through sports media output, including on social media, thereby advancing Binns's work into self-censorship in UK news rooms (2017a and 2017b). More widely, this research has highlighted and explored the wider factors that compromise the truthfulness and reliability of information flows in the sports media, and as such has built on the work of Grimmer (2017) and Cable and Mottershead (2018). Wider still, it has brought into focus other ethical breaches and issues in sports journalism around fabrication, superficiality of coverage and the treatment of colleagues. Building on the central role that social media has established in sports journalists' routines and practice (English, 2016; Lambert 2018a; Sheffer and Schultz, 2010), social channels have been shown to pose fresh ethical challenges for sports journalists – not least the handling of online abuse – and to cast older challenges, such as verification, in a digital aspect. The thesis has challenged previous research into codes of conduct in sports journalism, finding little by way of support for a bespoke code for the industry as proposed by Ramon-Vegas and Rojas-Torrijos (2018). It has also built on work by Sanford Horner (2015) and Davies (2008) by using the ethical concept of duty to examine sports journalists' behaviour from a fresh angle, finding that the duties that sports journalists regard themselves as having are varied and in some instances inconsistent.

Notions of how professional identity among sports journalists can overlap with issues around ethical standards have previously been considered by Hardin, Zhong and Whiteside (2009) and Rowe (2005 and 2007), with the 'toy department', 'cheerleaders' and 'fans with typewriters' tags traditionally used to refer to sports journalists implying some form of debased content stemming from sports journalists' approach to their roles. Professional identity in this project has been explored through the concepts of *ball watching* and *family resemblance*, and while the data reveals some instances of behaviour which would seem to fall into the pejorative category of 'fan with typewriter', what emerges more generally is how

the social media era has engendered the need for a more nuanced understanding of how fandom applies to sports journalists' work. Developing work by McEnnis (2018b), a binary contrast of cheerleading versus Fourth Estate journalism is too blunt.

What emerged in this project's Summary of Findings and Analysis is how the issues raised by the different objectives overlap and intersect, with social media forming a shared backdrop. The overall conclusions are as follows:

- Self-censorship is a widespread and at times insidious aspect to contemporary sports journalism practice, inhibiting the emergence of truth and honest opinion. Social media has led to new – and arguably more complex – forms of self-censorship
- Online abuse is widespread, and for some participants online abuse – whether of them or of the subjects of their stories – is a quotidian experience
- Perhaps paradoxically, social media is viewed as facilitating the spread of inaccuracies, but is perceived by some as a potent driver of improved standards of accuracy, due to journalists feeling that their work is under greater scrutiny than ever before. Moreover, social media is viewed by some sports journalists as a corrupting influence on the integrity of sports journalism, with large Twitter followings corrupting sports journalists by prompting them to make editorial judgements based on their followers' anticipated reaction
- Sports journalists' sense of their duties is multifarious and often individually and collectively incoherent, with some participants holding contradictory – or at least conflicting – notions of what their duties are. Some duties can, perhaps paradoxically, inhibit truth-telling
- If a code of conduct is a “collective conscience of a profession” (Keeble, 2009: 15), then UK sports journalists lack that collective conscience due to an inadequate awareness, interest and engagement with codes. Sports journalists' behaviour is informed or regulated as much by – or more by – unwritten rules and 'pack' instinct as it is by formal codes. There is a strong element of pack self-policing



- Despite most participants' firm insistence on not having broken the law or codes, some of their descriptions of particular incidents and working practices suggest that on occasion they have not accurately or truthfully represented stories
- Three of the participants worked for *The News of the World* in the period leading up to the phone-hacking scandal that led to the newspaper being shut. A by-product of the investigation into the stated research objectives is data on the phone-hacking scandal. None of the participants involved with *NotW* said they hacked phones or knew about the practice, although one stated that he would probably have hacked phones had he been aware of how to do so. This would have been done out of the pressure to land scoops
- Contemporary sports journalism is an emotionally demanding activity, with participants manifesting a spectrum of emotions, both positive (personal fulfilment) and negative (burnout, ennui), in the course of conveying their lived experience of working in the industry
- The binary distinction between a) cheerleading/fans-with-typewriters sports journalism and b) serious, watchdog sports journalism is inadequate. A number of participants emphasise the need to embrace an element of fandom in their coverage. This is distinct from crude characterisations of 'cheerleading', and represents in some instances a form of adaptation to a new media ecosystem that has digital interactivity at its centre.

Based on the findings, this thesis now proceeds to make recommendations for industry. These two recommendations are made because, between them, they relate to all four research objectives. The extent of self-censorship (RO1) established by this research project is the basis for Recommendation One. The ethical challenge (RO2) of dealing with the experience of online abuse in the emotionally demanding arena of contemporary sports journalism (RO4) is the stimulus behind Recommendation Two. Both recommendations are anchored to codes of conduct, thereby connecting with RO3. It is hoped that the implementation of Recommendation One will lead to less compromised output from sports media outlets by raising awareness among sports journalists of self-censorship. The implementation of Recommendation Two will hopefully simultaneously protect sports

journalists from the potentially harmful effects of online abuse while stimulating greater professional reflection.

## 6.2 Recommendations for Industry

The thesis makes two recommendations for the sports journalism industry and media regulators in the UK:

- **Recommendation One** On the basis of the research, self-censorship and its impact on the flow of accurate information and honestly-held opinion is sufficiently widespread that its existence needs to be openly discussed by sports desks and their reporting teams in order to facilitate a more detailed, honest form of sports journalism. Heads of Sport and other sports editors should facilitate these discussions among staff. These discussions should take place with reference to the principle of accuracy, which is invariably enshrined in the first clause of a journalism code of conduct (IMPRESS, 2017; IPSO, 2019).
- **Recommendation Two** Online abuse of sports journalists and the subjects of their stories is seemingly widespread, with sports journalists frequently citing the importance of a “thick skin” in dealing with it. However, the ‘Have a Thick Skin’ response to coping with social media abuse seems, *prima facie*, to be inadequate in terms of protecting the mental health of sports journalists. Employers, regulators and sports journalism organisations, such as the Sports Journalists’ Association and the Football Writers’ Association, should collectively draft guidance on how sports journalists should respond to such abuse, and organise forums where instances of abuse can be shared and victims receive support. Regulators such as IPSO and IMPRESS should consider a method of formally acknowledging such guidance. This would serve to not only officially embed such guidance in journalism practice but could also serve as a means of generating more engagement by sports journalists with codes, and stimulate individual reflection.

These recommendations are intended to ensure that this research project, which has made significant findings around sports journalism ethics and lived experience, is not an inert

document but has a positive impact on the integrity of sports media content, and helps sports journalists contend with a challenging aspect of their online professional experience.

### 6.3 Reflections

Midway through gathering the data for this thesis, I was invited by the Gloucestershire Philosophical Society to share my thoughts. The evening was gratifying for a number reasons. Firstly, because members of the public actually bothered to come out on a chilly night and listen to a sports journalist not only talk but talk about ideas. Secondly, because it was a handy way to receive multiple pieces of feedback in the space of just one evening. And, thirdly, because it was the only time a conference organiser has had the confidence to give me a beer *before* I have spoken. During questions, and with me down to the final few sips of ale, one member – a retired policeman, in fact – asked a question that roused me from my Kantian dogmatic slumbers: had I considered using a Hegelian perspective rather than Kant’s in order to analyse media ethics? Much debate followed as I combed the depths of my brain to offer a coherent justification for why – in the pantheon of German philosophers – Kant trumps Hegel in the eyes of a rugby journalist. Writing this conclusion, Hegel comes to mind again. “The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk,” he wrote (Hegel, 1821/1952: 13). I would not be so bold as to assume that the goddess of wisdom has touched this thesis, but Hegel’s sentiment of knowledge only crystallising at the very end of a process is one that resonates. Of course, an alternative philosophical framework could have been applied, but the Kantian approach has, I feel, illuminated important issues around sports journalism ethics and made me, at least, see my own industry in a sharper light as the dusk settles on this project. The thesis began with me invoking remarks by Alan Rusbridger, in which the former *Guardian* editor appealed to the importance of moral philosophy in navigating the complexities of journalism practice in the digital age. What has followed has been an attempt to contribute to that approach: a study of applied ethics in sports journalism. The subject of this project’s exploratory case study, David Walsh, has written of how he is interested in “dusty abstracts like journalism and truth” (Walsh, 2012: 72), and the application of abstract terms to the practicalities of sports journalism has yielded insights into the ethical issues facing contemporary UK sports journalists, not least self-censorship, compromised information flows, social media corruption and the blurred line between online criticism and

online abuse. The application of IPA and AE has also yielded a vivid sense of what it is to live and breathe as a sports journalist in the contemporary digital environment. Kant, Rusbridger and Walsh might be an unlikely triumvirate, but they have helped guide this project over some new ground.

#### *6.4 Final Remarks*

This project has focused on how the digital era, particularly social media, has affected the ethics of sports journalism practice, and also on what it is to live and breathe as a contemporary sports journalist. New issues and quandaries have arisen as a consequence of that digital era, and they have been explored in detail. However, at the project's end, words written before the social media revolution had properly hit its stride remain, to me, strikingly pertinent:

Ethical journalism is not an oxymoron. Ethical journalism is not only possible, it is essential; not just for journalists' sense of self-worth, but for the health and well-being of society. It requires journalists – wherever they work – to be reflective practitioners, engaged in a constant process of reflection and learning while doing their job. And it requires journalists to be prepared to voice their concerns within the newsroom (Harcup, 2007: 144).

This project has, in one sense, been one very long process of reflection by one sports journalist, and a process which has left me personally invigorated and attuned to my own sense of moral agency as a journalist. In another sense, however, it has been an attempt to offer insights into the issues affecting the broader sports journalism industry in the UK, and it is my hope that it will serve to animate further ethical reflection and practice within it.

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## APPENDIX ONE: Templates of letters to potential participants, including informed consent form

### 1a) Template of Letter to Interview Participants, Including Informed Consent Form



Researcher: Tom Bradshaw  
Senior Lecturer & Course Leader in Sports Journalism

School of Media, University of Gloucestershire,  
Park Campus, The Park, Cheltenham, GL50 2RH

#### ***Title of Study: Sports Journalism – Ethics, Freedom of Expression and Professional Identity in the Digital ‘Post-Truth’ Era***

*Date here*

Dear xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx,

Thank you for your time discussing with me your potential participation in my research. As we discussed, as well as being a practising sports journalist, I am a researcher and PhD student at the University of Gloucestershire. I would like to invite you to take part in a research study I am doing for my PhD thesis. Your participation in the study is voluntary. **The purpose of this study is to explore sports journalism ethics and professional identity in the digital age.**

I would like to invite you to take part in a one-to-one interview with me. The interview would inquire about your own experience of ethical issues arising in the course of your professional practice, and would also inquire about how the growth of digital technology has affected your sense of professional identity. The interview would take place at a mutually convenient time at a place of your choosing. The interview will be detailed, so I would like to set aside around two hours for it.

When writing up the findings of my interviews, the identity of all participants will remain anonymous, as will the relevant individuals/organisations that are referred to where it is felt that there could be a legal issue if the identity was retained. I will keep the data confidential, with only me and my two PhD supervisors having access to it. All physical data, for example a printed transcript, will be kept in my locked office. Digital data will be password-protected. Once the study is completed, it is likely that I will present the results at conferences and

publish them in an academic journal. As stated above, no participant will be identified by name and the data will be anonymised.

You are free to withdraw from the study at any point until two months have lapsed following the interview.

By taking part in this study, you may help the development of codes of conduct/editorial codes of practice in sports journalism.

The University of Gloucestershire's Research Ethics Committee has approved this study. If you have any concerns, please contact the committee's chair, Dr Malcolm MacLean, by emailing [mmaclean@glos.ac.uk](mailto:mmaclean@glos.ac.uk).

If you would like to participate in this study, please read and sign the attached informed consent form and complete the section beneath it that allows you to suggest dates, times and a location for the interview.

Many thanks,

Tom Bradshaw



### Informed Consent Form

<b>Title of Project</b>	<i>Sports Journalism – Ethics, Freedom of Expression and Professional Identity in the Digital 'Post-Truth' Era</i>	
<b>Researcher</b>	Tom Bradshaw Senior Lecturer & Course Leader in Sports Journalism	
Do you understand that I have asked you to participate in a research study?	YES	NO
Have you received and read the attached information letter?	YES	NO
Do you understand the procedures regarding the anonymisation of data?	YES	NO

Do you understand how the data is due be used in research and publications?	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
Do you understand that you are free to contact the researcher to ask questions about this study?	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
Do you understand that you are free to refuse participation, or to withdraw from the study, at any time, without consequence, up to two months after the interview has been conducted?	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
Do you understand that I will keep your data confidential? Do you understand who will have access to your information?	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
Do you understand that I will retain the data after the thesis is completed, so as to enable me to potentially refer to it when working on subsequent research?	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
Do you understand that if evidence of criminality emerges then the authorities will be informed in order to protect the public?	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>

**I wish to take part in this study:**

PRINTED NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE: \_\_\_\_\_

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

CONTACT NUMBER: \_\_\_\_\_

EMAIL: \_\_\_\_\_

My suggested dates and time for the interview are: 1) \_\_\_\_\_

2) \_\_\_\_\_

3) \_\_\_\_\_

I would like the interview to take place at: \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix 1b) Template of Letter to Diary Participants, Including Informed Consent Form



Researcher: Tom Bradshaw  
Senior Lecturer & Course Leader in Sports Journalism

School of Media, University of Gloucestershire,  
Park Campus, The Park, Cheltenham, GL50 2RH

### ***Title of Study: Sports Journalism – Ethics, Freedom of Expression and Professional Identity in the Digital ‘Post-Truth’ Era***

*Date here*

Dear xxxxxxxxxxxxxx,

Thank you for your time discussing with me your potential participation in my research. As we discussed, as well as being a practising sports journalist, I am a researcher and PhD student at the University of Gloucestershire. I would like to invite you to take part in a research study I am doing for my PhD thesis. Your participation in the study is voluntary. **The purpose of this study is to explore sports journalism ethics and professional identity in the digital age.**

I would like to invite you to complete a diary in which you would log instances of ethical dilemma or tension that arise in the course of your professional practice, and your reflections on how you negotiated – and potentially resolved – the dilemma/tension. These could relate to your interactions with sources, colleagues, and fellow journalists from other organisations. The diary would be kept for a six-month period.

The study is particularly focused on issues of self-censorship (i.e. the withholding of information from a piece of journalism, perhaps in order to preserve a relationship with a source or out of concern by a journalist at the reaction the piece may receive), so the diary would need to contain any instances of this and reflections about them. More guidance about the focus and structure of the diary will be provided via a face-to-face meeting or Skype/telephone call prior to the start of the diary being kept.

When writing up the findings of the diaries, the identity of all participants will remain anonymous, as will the relevant individuals/organisations that are referred to where it is felt that there could be a legal issue if the identity was retained. I will keep the data confidential, with only me and my two PhD supervisors having access to it. All physical data, for example a printed transcript, will be kept in my locked office. Digital data will be password-protected.

Once the study is completed, it is likely that I will present the results at conferences and publish them in an academic journal. As stated above, no participant will be identified by name and the data will be anonymised.

You are free to withdraw from the study at any point until two months have lapsed after the diary is submitted to me.

By taking part in this study, you may help the development of codes of conduct/editorial codes of practice in sports journalism.

The University of Gloucestershire's Research Ethics Committee has approved this study. If you have any concerns, please contact the committee's chair, Dr Malcolm MacLean, by emailing [mmaclean@glos.ac.uk](mailto:mmaclean@glos.ac.uk).

**If you would like to participate in this study, please read and sign the attached informed consent form and complete the section beneath it that allows you to suggest a date for the commencement of the diary.**

Many thanks,

Tom Bradshaw

**Informed Consent Form**

<b>Title of Project</b>	<i>Sports Journalism – Ethics, Freedom of Expression and Professional Identity in the Digital ‘Post-Truth’ Era</i>	
<b>Researcher</b>	Tom Bradshaw Senior Lecturer & Course Leader in Sports Journalism	
Do you understand that I have asked you to participate in a research study?	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
Have you received and read the attached information letter?	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
Do you understand the procedures regarding the anonymisation of data?	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
Do you understand how the data is due be used in research and publications?	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
Do you understand that you are free to contact the researcher to ask questions about this study?	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
Do you understand that you are free to refuse participation, or to withdraw from the study, at any time, without consequence, up to two months after the diary has been submitted to the researcher?	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
Do you understand that I will keep your data confidential? Do you understand who will have access to your information?	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
Do you understand that I will retain the data after the thesis is completed, so as to enable me to potentially refer to it when working on subsequent research?	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>

Do you understand that if evidence of criminality emerges then the authorities will be informed in order to protect the public?	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
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**I wish to take part in this study:**

PRINTED NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE: \_\_\_\_\_

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

CONTACT NUMBER: \_\_\_\_\_

EMAIL: \_\_\_\_\_

My suggested date for the commencement of the diary is: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix 2: Schedule of Interview Questions**

### **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) element of this project will be partially achieved through the method of semi-structured interviews.

Central to the success of an IPA project is the depth of the data, which, in this instance, is in turn reliant on the quality of the interviews. It is therefore vital that the interview technique is strong, with open questions and follow-up questions.

It may be that the schedule of questions needs to be departed from in order to fully explore particular themes that emerge in each interview.

#### **Schedule of questions:**

1. In your experience, what are the main ethical issues affecting sports journalists in the course of their work?  
*(Supplementary: Can you describe the most recent ethical dilemma that confronted you as a sports journalist?)*
2. Do you think a sports journalist has duties, and – if so – to whom?  
*(Supplementary: What examples can you give of you fulfilling such a duty?)*
3. In your experience, what are the most important ethical qualities that a sports journalist should possess or seek to cultivate, and why?  
*(Supplementary: Can you give an example from your own practice of how an ethical quality has prompted you to make the decision that you did?)*
4. In your experience, where do sports journalists acquire their professional values from?  
*(Supplementary: How significant a role do editors and peers play in setting values?)*
5. What bearing do the Editors' Code of Practice and other regulatory codes have on your practice as a sports journalist?  
*(Supplementary: Do you believe such codes are irrelevant, essential or something else?)*
6. What impact do you believe the pressure to achieve high audience figures, particularly online, has had on the content of sports journalism?  
*(Supplementary: Give an example from your own work as a sports journalist of how the quality/quantity of content has changed due to audience targets.)*
7. In your experience, in what ways has the rise of social media posed fresh ethical issues for sports journalists?  
*Supplementary a) Has the issue of clickbait affected your own practice and that of the newsroom(s) you work in?*  
*Supplementary b) How prominent is the issue of fake news and verification in your own practice and that of the newsroom(s) you work in?*
8. In your experience as a sports journalist, have you ever encountered behaviour that has breached the law or ethical codes? Have you ever breached the law or ethical codes yourself, and if so, why?
9. To what extent do you think self-censorship is an issue in sports journalism? *Supplementary a. Can you give examples of when you have self-censored a fact or opinion, and if so what motivated you to do so?*  
*Supplementary b. To what extent do sports press officers influence what you do or do not publish as a sports journalist?*

10. Sports journalists have previously been characterised as belonging to the “toy department” of news organisations, fulfilling a “cheerleading” role rather than that of watchdog. In your experience, is that fair?  
*Supplementary a.* How in your experience have you fulfilled the role of watchdog?
11. In your experience, do you think it is the case that sports journalists spend – or have spent – too much time covering matches and press conferences (i.e. working ‘on diary’) rather than investigating ‘harder’ issues such as those around the governance of sport?
12. Can you describe your own experience and feelings of how the increasing shift to digital output has affected your sense of what it is to be a sports journalist?
13. What tasks are now asked of you during a typical working day and how, if at all, does this vary from a decade ago?
14. How has your own sense of professional identity altered over the past decade?
15. Do you believe that sports journalism is a profession or a trade? Why do you believe it is one rather than the other?
16. In your experience, how firm is today’s distinction between sports journalism and sports PR?
17. What do you think are the essential characteristics that define a sports journalist in today’s media environment?

## Appendix 3: Interview Data

### Interviewee 1 - Alpha

#### Transcript:

TB: It's quite a general question to start off with, which is in your own professional experience what do you believe are the main ethical issues affecting sports journalists in the course of their work?

Int1: The main ethical issues? I mean, well, other than – we're not talking about legal issues here are we? – libel, defamation?

TB: I suppose it's interesting to think about how those two can sometimes intersect, how sometimes you sail close to the wind as it were with maybe remarks that might be construed as defamatory – it could become an ethical issue.

Int1: Um, can you give me a pointer here Tom on what...

TB: Yeah, that's fine. So one frequent source of tension ethically is the relationship between a journalist and their sources, or maybe pressures that you get from editors sometimes to pursue a certain angle that you're maybe uncomfortable with, or maybe copy being altered, that kind of thing.

Int1: Yeah, I mean, sometimes I've been told stories in confidence by certain sources and I know these stories to be true and yet if I published them it might conflict their relationship with me. However, there's been times when regardless of that I've ran certain stories on the sports pages of a regional newspaper despite being advised not to for the sake of my relationship with that club. I've done that anyway because I knew the story would be true and more to the point I knew it was going to come out sooner rather than later anyway.

An example of that would be a player, a Super League player of a certain club, I knew he's handed in a transfer request and he wanted to leave that club because he'd fallen out with the coach. I got told, "Leave that story well alone, we don't want it coming out". I knew it to be true, he was a high-profile player at a big club. I ran the story as an exclusive in the following day's paper, it was a back page lead. Ethically, you could say, what was I doing there in terms of betraying that contact but, like I said, I knew it would come out anyway.

TB: A connected question to that then is do you think a sports journalist has duties, and if they do have duties to whom do they have those duties because I suppose what motivated you in that particular instance to feel that you did have to publish?

Int1: Yeah, I mean that's the perfect follow up question, because it was my job. It was my duty to report what I knew to be a fact. A massive, massive story for this particular club and player was brewing behind the scenes and the wheels were well in motion. To not report it, you wouldn't be doing your job. And, for me as a journalist, the job comes first and this contact wasn't someone that I'd lose any sleep over having a temporary falling out with

over. There was a bit of conflict after it but it was quickly brushed over. More to the point I got that story out there that following day.

TB: So that desire to get the story out there first trumps the preservation of a relationship with what you might call a, um, less important contact? Is that fair?

Int1: In that instance, absolutely, it did. Umm. Not necessarily in all cases. Sometimes perhaps you are, certain stories are best left alone. I'll tell you another example. We, urm, I've given the students a talk today, we've talked about a chap called Zak Hardaker who last September tested positive for cocaine. Now, there was a story brewing at the time that Hardaker had tested positive for cocaine. Nothing official had come out from Castleford or UK Anti-Doping. So it was all conjecture. I heard from good authorities that he'd been busted, he'd been caught, either by his club or by UK Anti-Doping in an official test, and it was cocaine. Now, in that instance, you could be the first to run the story and say Hardaker has been done for cocaine but legally imagine if it wasn't that – it might have been a sort of a steroid or a stimulant that he'd.... So there's the ethics there of knowing, well, I suppose that's the legalities of it, to be quite honest, but in hindsight if I'd run the story I'd have been right and you might have got the story first. I suppose it depends in the running of certain stories, it depends on how absolutely dead sure you are, because obviously if you got something like that wrong you could get sued and your career could be over.

TB: So is there an element of self-preservation in a way, or just professionalism you might say?

Int1: Yeah, no absolutely, there's self-preservation in a lot of walks of life these days, you've got to look after your own career haven't you? Just for the sake of one story you can't take a risk that big. In terms of that player's transfer story we talked about, I knew that to be 100 per cent true, hence why I ran it, despite being told privately by sources that you haven't got this story. Well actually, I have because you told me it and it's going to go in, yeah.

TB: So, I mean you mentioned there about obviously the need to be accurate, to be truthful, and it probably ties in with this question, which is, in your experience what in your opinion are the most important ethical qualities that a sports journalist should possess, or, if they don't have them should sort of seek to cultivate in themselves?

Int1: Ethical qualities?

TB: Yeah, so you mentioned there about that sense of – it came across when you answered the question – about maybe that sense of, you know, responsibility to make sure that you get your facts absolutely right, not playing fast and loose with those.

Int1: Yeah, I think that's it, Tom. Your facts do need to be right as a journalist. Again, I've been talking to the guys this morning, you've got to get your facts right, whether you're writing a story, doing your research, reporting, talking about it on the radio. I think get your facts right before you even go to actually put it out there on radio, on social media, in print form. That would be the key quality of a journalist. In answer to your question, get your facts right. Get your facts right all day long. That would be the over-riding message for a



journalist and then of course there's knowing what to do with them, making sure you do it the right way, legally. I think when it comes to things such as ethics you've got to think about your own position as well.

TB: What do you mean by that?

Int1: Just in terms of, if you know you've got a good story why should you hold just because someone's said 'I'd rather you didn't'? That's what I mean, going back to that transfer story.

TB: So is there an element there of assertiveness being required as well then?

Int1: Yeah, absolutely, you need to be assertive, I'd say you need to be hungry for your stories, passionate, you need to be very thick-skinned. I think you need to have a certain desire for journalism, to work in it for a number of years, and to get your stories. I don't, I think you'll know yourself, I don't think stories always come to you. Good stories you have to work hard for, you have to cultivate your contacts, sometimes you have to do plenty of digging, sometimes you might be sat there in an office or at home making endless phone calls for one decent bit of news that you can then run. That comes down to, as you said, assertiveness, perseverance, erm, and a thick skin. The amount of times I might have, I've been threatened with bans for what I wrote when I worked on a certain regional newspaper over what I wrote...

TB: Bans from grounds, bans from press access?

Int1: Ummm, press access and from covering the games at that stadium. In my opinion absolutely ludicrous. But I wrote comment stroke opinion pieces about this club's administration – as in the chairman, chief exec, managing director – who in my opinion were all a bit of a joke. I put that in print, they didn't like it, I was threatened with bans, however, if I'd not put that I wouldn't be doing my job. My opinion, it was in an opinion piece but I was presenting it, not so much as fact, I was presenting it as opinion but it was my take on it, and it was my job as a specialist correspondent to convey that to the readers of my newspaper.

Ahh, it's warm!

TB: It is warm, isn't it? Erm, if you want to get into the shade at any point just...

Int1: No, no, I'm fine.

TB: Erm, it's interesting there because in the same you answer you kind of refer to cultivating contacts but the example there is one where sometimes, you know, those contacts, if you feel you've got that duty to kind of present the situation as you see it, then potentially the cultivation of contacts is at loggerheads with that editorial position.

Int1: Massively, massively. And for me in my job at this particular paper that was a constant source of conflict, all the time because this was a club that kept experiencing financial difficulties because of its ownership. It got relegated twice and it was one disaster after

another, so while you are grateful at times as a journalist to have these contacts how can you not report those stories that are developing all the time i.e. one disaster after the other, on and off the field.

TB: Yeah, So...

Int1: Catalogue of mismanagement.

TB: Another question now. Where do you think it is that sports journalists maybe get a sense of their professional values? We spoke a little bit, well in your answer you spoke about the value of being truthful and accurate, but do you think you get a sense of those values maybe from, is it a code of conduct that maybe instils those values or maybe a sense of what's in the prevailing culture in the particular news company you are working for? Have you any ideas around that, of where values come from within the sports journalism industry?

Int1: In my own experience, Tom, I think it's an individual thing, you develop regardless of who you work for at the end of the day you're almost working for yourself aren't you in one form or another. You might work for a certain newspaper, you might do freelance for another newspaper while you're employed by another, but at the end of the day I think your professional values, I think any good journalist, including myself, has their own self pride in the way they go about the business. Erm, and I think, I think that comes across in the values that they sort of carry out their work by in terms of being honest, hard-working, a bit savvy when needed, erm...

TB: What do you mean by savvy?

Int1: Well...

TB: Cute?

Int1: A little bit cute in terms of the information that you get. Going back to my original point, if you get a good story, if you're a journalist who enjoys breaking stories, you've got the desire to do that then you're willing to compromise a contact or a relationship with a contact for the sake of running that story that you know to be true, so you're giving the readers that story, you're beating your competitors and rivals to get the story out there first, albeit at the expense of a potential conflict with a contact. So I think that comes under the category of values in terms of having that drive and determination to always get the best stories as a journalist. Yeah.

TB: So does the Editors' Code of Practice or other regulatory codes have any bearing on your work, on your practice as a sports journalist?

Int1: Yeah, I think you're always aware of the legal implications. Obviously I've done my NCTJ many years ago, we obviously did law. You're aware of things like libel, defamation, you've obviously got to adhere to them when reporting any sports stories.

TB: And with regard to the Editors' Code of Practice, which I think used to be regulated by the Press Complaints Commission and is now by the Independent Press Standards Organisation, is that, do you think those codes have any relevance today, or are they essential for journalism, or do you think for sports journalists – because your answer previously focused on the legalities really rather than codes of conduct and regulation.

Int1: Yeah, I mean, being totally honest, Tom, I've spent 95 per cent – 99 per cent – of my journalism career in sport and I've never massively had to come across, I've obviously got a copy of it, the little sort of..., but I've never had to delve into it too deep being brutally honest with you.

TB: So is there an awareness of it, but it's not a kind of essential... It's not looming large in your professional practice?

Int1: It's not, it's more that it's not such a big concern in the stories that I do – match reports, player interviews – it's not something that you need to concern yourself with as much as if you were doing hard news at the front of the paper rather than sports stories at the back.

TB: Yeah, got you. Erm, slight change of tack now. What impact do you think pressure to achieve high audience figures, particularly online, has had on the content of sports journalism? That might be the volume of content or it might be the quality of it. I don't know if that's anything you've got experience of?

Int1: Yeah, I mean when I worked at my regional paper for five years there was a big shift towards an online presence. For example, previously when I first started there in 2011 we would do 99 per cent of it was about the newspaper, it was a daily newspaper, and if you were covering a match your match report and your quotes piece were massively important. But alongside that they introduced an online on the whistle match report and that evolved into an online blog which rather than doing six pars on the final whistle and being able to write your match report for the paper there was a massive shift towards social media. You had to tweet from a game from an official work account; you had to, erm, start the blog an hour or so before the game had kicked off, with team news, and this would be on the newspaper website and it would actually be more often than not the best-read story in the entire newspaper website that day. Because that many people logged on to it. The sports editor said, we want you to start it two or three, well, probably an hour-and-a-half before kick off; on average for a three o'clock Sunday afternoon game you might need to have it up and running by half one. Whereas previously the only online thing you had to do was your six pars on the final whistle. So right throughout the game from half one onwards, team news, you had to import and embed tweets like pictures people had put on Twitter, even videos and Vines, regular score updates as well as your on-the-whistle match report which would head up the live blog. You sort of, six, eight, ten pars at the top. So that's how I saw it change.

And then, with breaking news, previously if something broke it might only be relevant, "Oh, we'll get that in tomorrow's paper," there was a big drive to get that straight online and the paper ended up becoming secondary by the time I left in 2016.

TB: And do you think the quality of online content has improved? You mentioned there about high viewing figures of particular stories, particularly live blogs, what about the overall quality of material that goes online?

Int1: I think it probably has improved actually, so yeah. I think sometimes there were certain pieces that would be used just for the web so were obviously enhancing web content because there might not be space for it in the paper. And God forbid people weren't reading the paper anyway but they'd read it online, so that was enhancing the online operation, the fact that more stories would go online than would make the paper. So the online operation, the website, was actually better than the print version of the paper.

TB: Connected with that, because you mentioned a bit of social media there, do you think the rise of social media has presented any fresh ethical issues for sports journalists? Erm, social media clearly lends itself to that social aspect, the interaction with fans, has that – you potentially poke your head above the parapet on social media when you interact with fan, don't you, and I just wonder whether that's prompted you to ever think about whether there's questions or a fresh approach you need to take in terms of your social media-based journalism?

Int1: Yeah, I think the one I largely use is Twitter and when I was at my paper for five years, the regional paper, erm, we actually had to set up our own Facebook accounts and post our own work on there. That's not particularly to do with the ethical side of it I'm just saying that's what I used when I was at that paper. **But I've always had a Twitter account and I think, I think you do have to be careful with Twitter, with what you put.** I mean I'm always extremely careful, I must admit, I'm wary of any potential saying the wrong things or, **I think it's quite a dangerous thing at times.**

TB: What do you think would constitute saying the wrong things? Something that maybe provokes a hostile reaction or...

Int1: Yeah, there's times when I did that, I'll be honest with you when I was in my previous job. **I'd post something work-related, maybe an article that I'd written, I'd post a link – hostile reaction. I remember once I posted an article about a former coach who'd been sacked was suing the current owner because he'd not paid him off properly. That was going to court, litigation was to follow, erm, I broke the story about that and then at the game later that day – it had come out in that morning's paper, I'd put it on Twitter and there was a game later that day – and I actually got abused by fans at that game for reporting factually correct information. Which is absolutely ludicrous, isn't it?**

TB: And was that something that you think was precipitated by it being out there on social media rather than just being out in the paper?

Int1: I think so, yeah, because people actually read it on social media. Yeah, they did. Because I tweeted it and other people had picked up on it online throughout the day, I actually saw two fans there, it was a game at London Broncos actually down in the capital, and I said hello to them and then a couple of hours later I saw them again and **they basically**

gave me dog's abuse by saying "how could you?". And I was like, "What the hell are you talking about." They were like, "How could you report a story like that, it's our last ever game in Super League – they'd just been relegated, the club I covered – and they actually said to me "How could you?" And I just almost laughed and said "It's my job, this is news. These papers were actually filed yesterday in court, therefore the solicitor gives me a ring and says this is going to court, run the story tomorrow." So you're doing your job but I think in answer to your question Tom about the ethics, I'm wary about what I put on social media. One for fear of upsetting people and getting a hostile reaction. And two for any potential fears of libel, defamation.

TB: And in connection with social media, is the spread of kind of misinformation or fake news something that you've come across in your work as a sports journalist, or maybe you need to be extra careful of your verification of sources? Is that something that comes up on your radar?

Int1: Erm, I've experienced it to a certain degree. I think sometimes now with the rise of social media you might get the rise of some so-called journalist purporting to report news when I would class it as fake news to a certain extent.

TB: Because it's what, a punter – a member of the public – putting stuff out there through social media possibly with no basis to it?

Int1: Yeah, things like that. Or even using social media to generate their own so-called profiles as journalists as opposed to... and then coming up with news but... Certain journalists I've come across might big up a story when it's not actually what they say it is, it's not actually a big story at all, it might just be a quotes reaction piece. But the way they bill it online and social media, "If you read tomorrow's paper for so-and-so the latest development" you think something big's happening. When you actually read it there's absolutely nothing, it's just post-match quotes. So... I found a bit of that on social media, journalists or news organisations – certain ones – use social media, like Twitter, to big themselves up, and that can lead to an exaggeration of stories and potential fake news.

TB: And that's not just then using social media to promote online hits, it's actually using social media to drive and promote a print product, as you say in maybe a slightly exaggerated way.

Int1: Yeah. Absolutely. Absolutely, it is. I've seen that, definitely.

TB: Okay, have you ever experienced or encountered behaviour whilst working as a sports journalist that you've thought has breached the law or an ethical code?

Int1: Ermm, I'm trying to think. Broke the law?...

TB: An associated question is whether you yourself have ever?

Int1: I've not myself. I've always been careful not to. I honestly can't think of any, Tom, of people who have broken that. Ermm. I mean, again, we're not talking legalities we're talking ethics?

TB: Well no. In this instance, the law as well. Yeah, breaking the law, breaking a code of conduct, passing some ethical line perhaps.

Int1: Yeah, the only thing that springs to mind is the fact that there's the issue over embargoed quotes about when they should be used. If you've interviewed someone or been to a press conference and there's a number of journalists that have been there and you say you'll put them out at a universally agreed time, it tends to be 10.30pm for newspaper websites. So, if you're a newspaper it will be in your following newspaper the print version the following day, but go on your actually website at 10.30. And then what you'll find now is that a lot of other organisations are maybe web-only, for example goal.com or ESPN. They might have been there so they'll put the stories, the quotes, out at 10.30 as well. What you sometimes find is that some journalists don't adhere to that and put them out straight away. That screws over a lot of other journalists and their ethics are brought into serious question by their peers because they've obviously broken what was an agreed embargo.

TB: What have you witnessed from the press pack in response to those incidents of embargo-breaking occurring, have you ever witnessed any confrontations, as it were, journalists challenging other journalists over the breaking of an embargo?

Int1: Yeah, I mean it's interesting, it happened last week – high profile. Pep Guardiola quotes. He came out and said we were offered Paul Pogba and I think it was Henrikh Mikhitarian, you could maybe check that, but definitely Paul Pogba. Guardiola said that, this was in the embargoed part of the press conference – until half ten – this went out earlier on by a journalist, I think he was an Italian journalist, who wasn't even at the press conference. So someone who was inside, one of the press pack who was there, had sent him the audio. This guy has spilt the beans early that day – early in the afternoon, shortly after the press conference – and spilt it out everywhere, so it's gone online. Journalists who were there, English journalists from national newspapers, were absolutely fuming and actually took to Twitter to absolutely savage this guy who for some reason put all the quotes out there about what Guardiola said about being offered these two Manchester United players in the January transfer window. So the response from the press pack, I'd say it was fierce and they were very high-profile journalists, football reporters, who were seriously giving it to this guy on Twitter.

TB: It's quite interesting because it suggests the idea of an almost self-policing taking place by the sports, by the press pack.

Int1: That's it, it's almost a – it's an unwritten rule – well, it's unwritten but very much accepted rule that 10.30pm is the time that such a story would go out.

TB: And is it almost a sense of honour being kind of breached, as it were, the professional etiquette?

Int1: Yeah, absolutely, it's a sense of you're screwing over your peers but you've almost screwed yourself over because you lose all respect. You've also ruined the story, the fact that it is out there. It could have been a backpage headline in several national newspapers because a lot of people might go to bed at 10.20, wake up the next day, pick up a national or even log online, see all this story about what Guardiola said. It was quite big news what he claimed. But the fact it came out early that afternoon would have ruined a lot of operations on sports desks for how they planned to use it.

TB: That's really interesting, thank you. Erm, Now you touched on this earlier when you mentioned about not publishing a story if it was going to alienate a big name or an important contact, but, erm, I just want to ask about whether you think self-censorship is an issue in sports journalism, and by self-censorship I mean the deliberate non-publication of stuff that you are maybe aware of or strongly held opinions that you feel but which for whatever reason you decide not to give vent to or to publish. Is that something you encounter, this self-censorship?

Int1: Just checking, Tom, when you say self-censorship what in terms of, do you mean opinions or...

TB: Interesting, it could be opinions or it could be facts as well, so it might be that you get a, you know, to go back to the example you gave earlier, a failed drugs test. Let's keep that a general thing not focusing on Zak Hardaker or anything, but if you're aware of a failed drugs test but a certain key contact, for example, who you rely on a lot, had beseeched you not to divulge it, I mean, not to publish that would be a form of self-censorship, because you're kind of muzzling...

Int1: Absolutely, yeah, yeah. It goes back to what we were saying doesn't it about whether you, how strong the actual story is, how true you believe it to be, and the risks associated with that legally or otherwise in terms of, you know, destroying the relationship with a contact. But for me the bigger issue would be the legalities of it in terms of whether I knew it to be true, whether it was safe to run legally. So sometimes there is a bit, I know what you're saying, you're almost policing yourself all the time as a journalist, you're censoring what you might or might not write, things like that.

TB: But by and large for you, you're saying that if you're convinced of the truthfulness of it, the accuracy of it, and that it's not going to be in breach of a legal order, for example, then your instinct is that you would publish?

Int1: Yes, absolutely. But in the case of the Hardaker, there was talk also that, I mean, you don't need to mention his name, but in terms of the player we're talking about someone, I did speak to other journalists, we did believe it to be cocaine he'd been found taking, but someone else he'd just been found drunk on a night out and that's why he'd been suspended. So, if you'd have ran a story saying he'd been caught taking cocaine when in reality he'd just turned up for training worse for wear or he'd not turned in because he's had a few drinks then can you imagine the ramifications for something like that? So, you've got to be extremely careful.

TB: And to what extent do the media officers, the press officers, at sports clubs have an influence over what you publish, whether you're on a freelance shift, [REDACTED] ...

Int1: I find them relatively helpful at times in rugby league terms. That's obviously the sport I largely cover. Erm, for example, a certain player made the England squad for the first time last month, so as soon as the squad got announced I emailed the press officer, asked for the player's number and within 20 minutes I had the player's number, could ring him up and do the interview for the following day's paper. In that respect they are very helpful. Erm, in other areas not so. They are not particularly authoritative in rugby league, the media departments are very thin on the ground, they might be, they'll employ you know a media graduate on almost minimum wage-type standard pay, erm, and they might not necessarily have the experience or know-how to give you what you want for a certain request.

TB: And that contrasts sharply though with a higher-tier football club and the departments there?

Int1: Yeah, massively. I mean I've covered a lot of Premier League football as well and there there's almost a small army of media people working in the media department. You might have a head of communications, a media manager, a press officer, a social media manager, erm, a club journalist. I've given you five or six titles there that you'll probably get at a Premier League club, as well as social media assistants. You'll have people doing the Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, website, match reporting. In the sport I largely cover, the Super League, it's one person for most clubs, sometimes two, sometimes three, depending on the resources of the club.

TB: So reading around some of the literature around sports journalism as I've done and how it's seen within journalism, sometimes it's been characterised as – there's the expression that sports journalism belongs to the toy department of the newsroom; the idea that it consists of, you know, fans with typewriters...

Int1: I'd agree with that...

TB: Would you?

Int1: To a certain extent.

TB: Interesting. I was going to ask you if you think that's a merited description.

Int1: I'm being totally honest, I don't think it's an unmerited description. I consider myself a journalist, yes, but I'm also a fan with a laptop, and I find it hugely enjoyable to be able to watch live sport which I love doing anyway, and to write about it, it's fantastic, so... I don't always consider it as a job, I consider it more as a hobby I get paid for. But yeah at the end of the day I am a qualified journalist, just to clarify that.



TB: Of course, and another way to look at it sometimes is that sports journalism has been described as fulfilling more of a cheerleader function than, you know, a watchdog function. Is that...

Int1: Yes, I'd agree with that to a certain extent as well. Yeah. I think, I think at times you will certainly perhaps in the regional press you might get certain papers that clubs will work extremely closely with and relationships can become too cosy in that there is interesting stuff happening behind the scenes, erm. I mean I remember the rugby union guys a few years ago – was it at Bath? – was it [REDACTED]? I can't think?...

TB: Matt Stevens?

Int1: Was it Matt Stevens sorry, yeah. I don't know what the situation was. Obviously that case came out but I'm sure there've been times where I've known stuff that's gone on at a regional paper that I've worked on, I've been told not to report it, such as that transfer request of a star player who wanted to leave because he'd stopped believing in the club basically. The club didn't want that out there. He was a home-grown player, one of the best players in the competition, future England star, he wanted out. I got told please don't report this. No, sorry, I know it to be true, this is going in the paper. So, yeah, I think that... I've actually noticed that, I've worked on news desks as well. News desks tend to be more ruthless as well, when it comes to stories like that. Whereas with sport, wanting to keep the relationship with the club cosy at times, they'll try and shy away a bit more from those difficult, bad news stories, as it were. Or sometimes pass them over completely to the newsdesk, almost abdicating responsibility for them.

TB: That's an interesting notion of the abdication of responsibility. Is that why you think that maybe this toy department tag is justified because if there's serious journalism to be done...

Int1: Yeah, absolutely. The club I covered went into administration three times. All the, the paper decided that all the off-field – as in the administration, financial meltdown stuff – was to be taken on by news. However, me being that specialist correspondent for that club, did more than my fair share of stories for that, for the news pages, as well as doing bits of the rugby at the back about how it was affecting the players, but the actual nitty-gritty was done by the news desk, of which I was more than happy – I actually insisted at times – that I sort of play my part, because it's a club I've covered for five years.

TB: But interestingly though that's almost you giving an example that is the opposite of what you've said because you're wanting to do that watchdog role, you're wanting...

Int1: Yeah, absolutely. I know, I've seen other journalists though, Tom, who are more than happy to say "I don't want anything to do with that, that's too tricky".

TB: Yeah. Thank you.

Int1: So I've seen both sides of it.

TB: Yes. You're familiar with the idea of journalists, sports journalists, being on a merry-go-round of press conferences, of match reports, and then press conferences. Do you think now, or maybe in the past, there has been perhaps maybe too much of a reliance on that kind of pseudo-events, the kind of diary – the on-diary stuff, like press conferences and match reports – and not enough emphasis on sports reporters doing the more off-diary, digging around stuff?

Int1: Yeah, I think even now there's this too obvious reliance on the weekly press conference. Why not dig up your own interviews, your own information, away from that? I've seen examples of that where reporters just wait for the Thursday pre-match press conference to get their stories and everyone else, you're just going to get the same material that everyone else has got.

TB: Yeah.

Int1: So why not think of a different angle, speak to someone else – maybe a former player, an opposition player to the team you're covering to get a different angle on it?

TB: Yeah, yeah. And also potentially would you say you can maybe go off-diary to look at those maybe hard sports news stories involving the administration of the sport or governing bodies. Do you think there's adequate coverage given to that?

Int1: Probably not, no. I think it's, I think sometimes when you read a piece like that it makes you realise that there aren't enough of those sort of pieces scrutinising the actual sport itself. Erm, in football, rugby league, rugby union, erm, I think, I think they do come about. Obviously you've got certain high-profile columnists which are paid very good money to write these sorts of pieces but, erm, certainly in rugby league, the sport that I largely cover, you don't see many pieces of that.

TB: Yeah. So just a final few questions that are going to look a little more bit more on sort of how, maybe, the growth of digital technology has affected the identity of being a sports journalist, and I just wonder, erm, what your experiences and feelings are of how the shift to digital output, including social media output, whether that's affected your sense of what it is to be a sports journalist? You mentioned earlier about maybe, erm, pseudo-accounts springing up on social media, people kind of purporting to be sports journalist but maybe not being bona fide sports journalists, do you think **the growth of social media** has kind of affected the sense of what it is to be a sports journalist? Is there no longer that sense of being distinct from your readers?

Int1: I think it has, yeah. **It's certainly spawned a generation of you could call them wannabe-journalists as opposed to bona fide, qualified, NCTJ-trained journalists.** Erm. Because there's literally hundreds of blogs, Twitter accounts, writing their own, you know-so-called news sites, writing stories on the sport that you might cover. So they're almost, they're almost a competitor in a certain sense in that they're out there on the internet. I mean I've seen a couple of seriously terrible news sites, erm, to be quite honest and the spelling, the grammar, has been that bad, but fans, because these fans, because this site was quite partisan they would never be critical of the club, a lot of the fans bought into

what these sites were about. And I actually took a step back and thought I'm glad that I'm not something like that, I'm actually a proper journalist looking for the proper stories, writing it properly rather than the rubbish they wrote a lot of the time on their sites.

TB: But yet there you mentioned them being a form of competition now because it's a fight for eyeballs.

Int1: Yeah, because it's out there. Exactly, it's out there online and obviously a lot of these sites have got Twitter accounts so they pop up on Twitter, on Facebook, erm, and they're a competitor of sorts, perhaps.

TB: Yeah. I just wonder how the tasks you do now, the work you do now as a sports journalist, do they differ in any way, or do they differ markedly, from what you were doing a decade ago?

Int1: Erm, a decade's not that long ago really, is it? I just think there's more, in my own job I'm still mainly writing for newspapers, I'm just finding now a lot of, erm, a massively increased social media presence across all sorts of news forms, isn't there? So, like your Twitter, Facebook, Instagram. Erm, let's be honest, this is where you can sometimes source stories from as well, which is something we wouldn't have done ten years ago, for example, because there wasn't Twitter then.

TB: No, but what about the associated issues, we touched on it earlier, of verifying that stuff. You mentioned earlier about the proliferation of amateur sites as it were and sometimes there's some dubious stuff going out on there. How do you separate the wheat from the chaff online, as it were, or is it harder to do that now?

Int1: I think it is. It depends, it depends what perspective you're looking at it from, doesn't it? I mean, on a personal level I'm a trained journalist and in my opinion I know what's a bone fide news site; for me, that would be a regional newspaper website, a national newspaper website, BBC, Sky, erm. The ones that I'd be dubious about are so-called amateur – almost fan – sites who present themselves as journalists stroke authorities on the game that I cover. So that's how I differentiate between the two.

TB: The brands you mention there though are quite what you'd call, kind of, traditional, mainstream brands.

Int1: Yeah.

TB: And obviously there's a changing media landscape where there are new sites out there and you as a freelancer, or somebody who does freelance work, do you not also think there is that sense of needing to tap into those new outlets really in terms of ensuring kind of longevity as a freelancer?

Int1: Absolutely, I've no qualms with new sites per se or new sites popping up, whether they're seen as competitors to the traditional brands, such as your regional and national newspapers I'd be more concerned with the actual quality of them in terms of I'd consume

them or indeed took them seriously as a sports reader. It depends on the quality of the site as opposed to it being independent or new, do you see what I mean?

TB: Yes I do, yeah. A couple of times in the interview you've mentioned about being NCTJ-qualified and that maybe giving you a sense, personally, of being a professional journalist or a qualified journalist. I just wonder whether in the context of the stuff we've touched upon with the changing patterns of content online whether your sense of professional identity as a journalist, whether it's changed over the past decade with the growth of social media. Do you think that traditional kind of qualified journalist going through traditional accrediting bodies, it's still an important sense of what it means to be a journalist?

Int1: I think it's probably... Because of the rise of so-called new journalists on Twitter and social media, if anything, when you are qualified it's almost a reminder that you have got that sort of pedigree stroke quality behind you which perhaps some of these others haven't got. Erm, but there is also the fact that it's perhaps less relevant than it once was in terms of now being able to get into different forms of sports journalism you don't necessarily need the NCTJ or even a degree to work your way into the industry.

TB: On that point, do you regard sports journalism as being a profession or more like a trade, or maybe a craft?

Int1: I'd probably call it a profession, that's the best way to describe it. It is a profession.

TB: What do you think distinguishes something as being a profession as opposed to something more trade-like?

Int1: Personally, I class a trade as a sort of tradesman, you know, a carpenter, a joiner, erm, I don't mean to sound snobbish whatsoever it's just the terms I'd define it within. Maybe things more manual for a trade, such as things that you do with your hands, obviously a builder, that might be a trade, a joiner, an electrician. Profession? Erm, I'd probably call it a profession, journalism. Yeah.

TB: But maybe not in the same category as you know traditionally the professions of medicine and law? They tend to be, they've got their own governing bodies, you can be struck off. The idea of a journalist being struck off, does that make you smirk or is there actually perhaps a genuine need for an organisation like that?

Int1: I think there is still governing bodies that so-called regulate it. I know you can't get struck off but you can still get sued for libel.

TB: Yeah.

Int1: I perhaps wouldn't put it on as high a plane as a doctor or someone like that. I'd still certainly call it a profession.

TB: Last couple of questions now. How firm do you think the distinction is today between sports journalism and sports public relations?

Int1: Erm, I think the lines are so blurred these days it's... The... sports journalism... I think a lot of journalists get a lot of their work through sports public relations one way or another. So, you might work with a club's PR department to get a player interview, if you're a Premier League club there might be one, two, even three, press officers sitting in on that interview and you might be told not to ask certain questions about that player, his life, or career, or incidents, or family, so I think it's become a lot more regulated in that respect by the clubs themselves and their own PR machines. Clubs are PR machines today aren't they? They're massive operations. Just an interesting point I was telling the students today and yesterday that a sport like rugby league, and rugby union probably to a lesser extent, there isn't that sort of, there aren't those barriers there that stop you getting good interviews with people because the sports haven't got that high profile, I mean league certainly hasn't got anything like the Premier League football, and neither's union to be fair. So you can... I think the less, I think the higher the profile the sport the more, the more barriers are up and the more the PR teams tend to obstruct journalists doing their jobs coming up with fresh, original content because they want it all for themselves on their own sites. And if they do give you something original like an interview with a player they'll regulate that to the nth degree.

TB: So how willing are you then to kick down those barriers as you term them sometimes, do you ever pitch them over?

Int1: Erm, to be honest, Tom, in my job I don't do a massive amount of Premier League football, and if anything it's, those sorts of barriers have turned me away from that anyway and I've more embraced the two forms of rugby – league and union – which I think it's quite interesting to cover both because you get a bit of an insight into both.

TB: And just to interrupt you there quickly is that maybe because you're, you're attracted to the idea that you can do your job properly, as it were, covering those sports rather than football. You can actually do the interrogation and ask the questions that you want?

Int1: Absolutely, yeah, yeah. I mean, that human interest pieces, those human interest pieces, that we've gone through today, Keegan Hirst speaking to him about being an openly gay Super League player, I would ring him up and sit down with him in a park like this and he'd give me half an hour and tell me about life as a Super League player in the media spotlight as an openly gay sportsman and how he'd like to break down barriers for footballers to come out. There's 800 Premier League footballers, how many are openly gay? Not a single one. Someone like Keegan Hirst, 'cos it's Super League – which is actually the second most-watched sport on Sky after football, believe it or not – you can get interviews like that in this sport. And two of the other interviews that I talked to the students about – John Bateman, a father at 15, he's now the best young forward in the Super League, plays for Wigan and England and all the top Aussie clubs want him. He was inspired by his daughter being born so young, he said he would have gone off the rails otherwise and that kept him on the straight and narrow, a lot his mates went to prison. You couldn't get these sorts of stories and human interest stories from Premier League footballers. Because, one, they may have been done by a rival; two, the clubs just wouldn't allow you to get that under the skin of the players, and to get that deep, and to talk about things like that.

TB: Yeah, so right at the start you mentioned about truth and accuracy being the values, well, what you're describing there about football, I mean, is it almost a charade, a sham in a way, because as a sports journalist now, as a football journalist mainly, your kind of tip-toeing around so many PR professionals potentially that is truth kind of lost amid that game?

Int1: I think, I think it, I'm not so sure it's about the truth being lost. I think what is difficult is to get stories behind the stories, stories behind the PR fluff, what they... I think it's difficult to get that. Back in the day, you might have been able to sit down with a... I'm not saying one-on-one player interviews don't happen and don't appear – they do – but not to the extent that you can get them in other sports, such as the ones I cover, and even if you do get a one-on-one – say you're Henry Winter and you're sat down with a player doing a one-on-one – there would be certain restrictions I'd imagine placed on that. Whereas in a sport like rugby league or rugby union I think you could speak to a player and wouldn't have any, you wouldn't be told anything about where you could or couldn't go with them, I wouldn't have thought. Erm, so yeah.

TB: Okay. Thanks. And the final question – it's quite a broad one and brings us full circle in a way – and that's, what do you think are the essential characteristics that define a sports journalist in today's sort of media environment?

Int1: Erm, the essential characteristics I'd say... First and foremost, although you don't always find it – I shouldn't say that really – the ability to write. Honestly, I think, it sounds obvious but I've found sometimes you'll get journalists who are outstanding news story-getters but they can't, they can't actually write. Erm, so, as a basic premise, I'd say written skills as a given. Beyond that, I'd say you need to be confident, assertive, very thick-skinned. You need to be perseverant, very hard working, you have to go the extra mile if you want to get ahead. I think, I'm trying to think what I can add to that. I think to a certain extent if you, you've always got to be thinking about potential angles for games and stories, and be switched on. You've got to be sharp, be it a press conference if you're coming up with stories, questions for coaches and players, angles for your preview material. When you're at a game itself you'll be thinking, what are the angles here? Err. Be well prepared. Develop contacts. Erm. Contacts are important aren't they? I mean, I've been in journalism for years but probably, I always think I'd have got better stories if I'd cultivated better contacts down the years, err. I'd back myself to write a report or a feature but I think, I know of other journalists come up on the rails a bit because they've got that sort of pushiness perhaps to sort of to push people for news, to give them news, to give them stories. Erm, so I think that sort of comes under perseverance, making your contacts, nurturing those contacts.

TB: And is that especially important for you as a freelancer with some of the freelance work that you do. Or do those attributes apply freelance or staffer?

Int1: Erm, yes, I'd say they were important to any journalist really. Erm, because even these days if you're a staffer who knows how safe you are in the current climate? Erm, you still have to, I don't think any journalist these days can rest on their laurels with cutbacks, redundancies all over the place, erm, obviously I got made redundant by my previous

employer 18 months ago, hence what pushed me into the sort of full-time freelance route. Erm, and I thought my job was safe – it wasn't because of massive cutbacks at that paper. So, yeah, I think regardless of whether you're on the staff, freelance, erm, retainer, you still need those same qualities regardless if you are to thrive as a journalist.

TB: Yeah, yeah, and just the point you made there about things maybe being precarious then, is that a factor now? I suppose over the past decade there's always been potentially some reviews and cutbacks being made – maybe no jobs ever been entirely safe – but do you think these days it is quite a precarious industry?

Int1: Massively, yeah, I really do. I've experienced it myself. I think it's just, every, everything is going freelance isn't it rather than full-time contracts, jobs, more and more freelance retainers, short-term contracts, erm, there's less and less security in the newspaper industry, local, regional and national without a shadow of a doubt.

TB: Does that make people – reporters, editors – likely to make, more likely to cut corners a little bit, chance their arm a bit more to make a name for themselves to get that story, or to push the rules a little bit?

Int1: I don't know about that. That probably comes down to the ethics of the, sort of, journalist in question. I just think it's a financial issue really that's forced these basically swingeing cutbacks all over the board in journalism. Erm, I don't think it's increased the desire to cut corners. I mean, it's certainly forced papers to cut corners in terms of how they go about their business, there's no doubt about that. If there was four people doing four jobs they might make one person redundant and there'd be three people doing four persons, so that's very much a corner cutting. That's what I've found across the board basically, but certainly in regional newspapers. Yeah.

TB: Thanks very much, [REDACTED].

Int1: No worries, is that okay?

### **Alpha – Initial Distillation:**

- Apparent in the transcript is a willingness to break confidences, compromise contacts, or ignore requests from contacts not to publish if the story is regarded as important to readers and/or it is believed that the story is going to emerge anyway. Participant's first duty is to convey facts and this duty is bound up with the participant's sense of what it is to be a sports journalist and their values. "To not report it, you wouldn't be doing your job. And, for me as a journalist, the job comes first and this contact wasn't someone that I'd lose any sleep over having a temporary falling out with" (p1). "If you get a good story, if you're a journalist who enjoys breaking stories, you've got the desire to do that then you're willing to compromise a contact or a relationship with a contact for the sake of running that story that you know to be true, so you're giving the readers that story, you're beating your competitors and rivals to get the story out there first, albeit at the expense of a potential conflict with a contact. So I think that comes under the category of values in terms of having

that drive and determination to always get the best stories as a journalist” (p4). Threatened by a club with a ban from games and press access over opinion pieces, but “if I’d not put that I wouldn’t be doing my job” (p3)

- Self-censorship: “Certain stories are best left alone” (in context of damaging relationships with contacts) (p2) and “you’re almost policing yourself all the time as a journalist, you’re censoring what you might or might not write” (p9). However, these remarks are dissonant with “When it comes to things such as ethics you’ve got to think about your own position as well... if you know you’ve got a good story why should you hold just because someone’s said ‘I’d rather you didn’t?’” (p2-3). The participant expressed a wariness of what he posted on Twitter out of concern for the reaction he could receive, not only online but in person. “I think you do have to be careful with Twitter, with what you put. I mean I’m always extremely careful, I must admit, I’m wary of any potential saying the wrong things or, I think it’s quite a dangerous thing at times... I’d post something work-related, maybe an article that I’d written, I’d post a link – hostile reaction. I remember once I posted an article about a former coach who’d been sacked was suing the current owner because he’d not paid him off properly. That was going to court, litigation was to follow, erm, I broke the story about that and then at the game later that day – it had come out in that morning’s paper, I’d put it on Twitter and there was a game later that day – and I actually got abused by fans at that game for reporting factually correct information. Which is absolutely ludicrous, isn’t it?” (p6). This self-censorship is connected too to worries of libel claims arising from social media posts. “I’m wary about what I put on social media. One for fear of upsetting people and getting a hostile reaction. And two for any potential fears of libel, defamation” (p7).
- Editors’ Code of Practice regarded as of negligible application to sports journalists. “I’ve never had to delve into it too deep being brutally honest with you... it’s not something that you need to concern yourself with as much as if you were doing hard news at the front of the paper rather than sports stories at the back” (p5)
- Participant emphasises the “unwritten rule” around observance of embargoes and describes a sense of self-policing in the way sports journalists enforce this. They give an example from a Manchester City press conference where a journalist put embargoed quotes out early:

*Int1: So the response from the press pack, I’d say it was fierce and they were very high-profile journalists, football reporters, who were seriously giving it to this guy on Twitter.*

*TB: It’s quite interesting because it suggests the idea of an almost self-policing taking place by the sports, by the press pack.*

*Int1: That’s it, it’s almost a – it’s an unwritten rule – well, it’s unwritten but very much accepted rule that 10.30pm is the time that such a story would go out.*

*TB: And is it almost a sense of honour being kind of breached, as it were, the professional etiquette?*

*Int1: Yeah, absolutely, it’s a sense of you’re screwing over your peers but you’ve almost screwed yourself over because you lose all respect (p8)*

- The influence of social media hovers through much of the transcription. The participant feels some sports journalists and media organisations use social media to exaggerate their stories in the pursuit of a bigger profile. “I found a bit of that on social media, journalists or news organisations – certain ones – use social media, like Twitter, to big themselves up, and that



can lead to an exaggeration of stories and potential fake news” (p7). “Wannabe” sports journalists also populate social media. The growth of social media has “certainly spawned a generation of you could call them wannabe-journalists as opposed to bona fide, qualified, NCTJ-trained journalists”, adding to the competition (p12)

- The participant supportive of the “fans with typewriters” description, emphasising how he viewed his career as a hobby he happened to get paid for rather than a job. “I don’t think it’s an unmerited description. I consider myself a journalist, yes, but I’m also a fan with a laptop, and I find it hugely enjoyable to be able to watch live sport which I love doing anyway, and to write about it, it’s fantastic, so... I don’t always consider it as a job, I consider it more as a hobby I get paid for. But yeah at the end of the day I am a qualified journalist, just to clarify that” (p10). Connectedly, the participant used the notion of a sports desk “abdicating responsibility” for more controversial, hard stories (such as those around recreational drug use) to the news desk. “News desks tend to be more ruthless as well, when it comes to stories like that. Whereas with sport, wanting to keep the relationship with the club cosy at times, they’ll try and shy away a bit more from those difficult, bad news stories, as it were. Or sometimes pass them over completely to the newsdesk, almost abdicating responsibility for them” (p11). While emphasising his own desire to perform watchdog journalism and the “nitty-gritty” of sports news reporting, he was critical of others in the industry. There are sports journalists “who are more than happy to say ‘I don’t want anything to do with that, that’s too tricky’” (p11).

## Interviewee 2 - Beta

### Transcript:

TB: In your experience, what do you believe are the main ethical issues, if any, affecting sports journalists in the course of their work?

Int2: Well, you know, truth I suppose is the one, isn't? "Comment is free facts are sacred", which is CP Scott, and I think that for me is the guiding one, truth. If you're not looking or writing something that you understand to be true or to the best of your knowledge or your endeavours have shown to be true, I think the problems start when you're putting stuff that you don't think or believe or you can't substantiate in the paper. At our lowly level that would be the big one for us, you know, ethical wise. Clearly, there are communities and we can probably go into that later, where there are different parts of society that need proper representation and what have you, but that's a slightly different argument, I'd say.

TB: Can you think of any, or can you describe, any recent ethical dilemmas that have confronted you during the course of your practice?

Int2: As I say, we're not in a war zone, we're not in the House of Commons, we're not, you know, necessarily at the front line of that sort of thing. Umm, no, only in the sense that the day-to-day... if I can think of something I'll let you know... but in the day-to-day business of making sure if you're interviewing someone that you represent them properly, if you're telling a news story that it's accurate. And I think that's common across all grounds, I'm just trying to think. Ummm, ethical, ethical... No, you know, it depends what you're... I'm not, there's not much phone-hacking thankfully at [REDACTED]. You know, that's not an issue. In terms of how I would conduct, you know, my working professional life if you want to call it that I can't think of any major ethical dilemmas; nothing beyond the, right, I've got to do this properly.

TB: Yeah. What about the relationship with sources and maybe navigating the preservation of relationships with them whilst also, you know, ensuring that the public are receiving the information, the stories, they're entitled to. Is there a bit of a tension you experience there?

Int2: Umm, from experience that becomes easier the longer you're doing it. You know and I know, without almost having to ask, what you can put in, what it would be best to leave out for the subject's, for his or her good, you know. Yeah, I don't know, I mean I spoke to someone the other day and a number of very interesting, potentially explosive, sort of quotes... We always discuss on the record and off the record but in this particular case I knew the bloke well enough that I don't have to... You know, I would know what you could use and what you couldn't use. Now maybe that would be different if you were a younger reporter but if you're going to use a... if you're uncertain you should always go back to the subject and say, "Look, this is...". Peter Jackson, who you would know, was very good at that. He'd write stuff for the *Mail*, big pub stories, but would go back and say "Look, this is what I'm going to write word-for-word, are you happy with it?" and most of the time people would say "yes". I mean you're talking about anonymous sources I guess. Again, we're not in MI5, MI6, or top realms of the government, so you've got to keep these things in

perspective. But in terms of, no, I think people... You've just got to see people right. I think if you're trying to exploit people, errr, that's where the problems start. You're trying to, you know, make something that isn't there or try and inflate a story to a level that it probably doesn't justify, that's where the problems start.

TB: Yeah.

Int2: You take each story on its merits.

TB. Okay. An associated question really. Do you think a sports journalist has duties, and if they do to whom do they owe those duties?

Int2: Duties. Yeah, you've probably got a duty to, err, yeah I've always thought you've got a duty to the people you're writing about. I think it's always useful to put yourself in the shoes of people you're writing about. If you're, I don't know, a rugby player and you've had a bad game then it's blatantly obvious, you know, to be personal in criticising an individual for having a bad game of rugby, you've got to be very careful how you do that. You've got a duty to the reader to tell the story fairly and you've probably got a duty to yourself or your newspaper depending on how you view it, or if you're freelance, to tell the story again as accurately as possible.

TB: Yep. And you mentioned earlier about the quality really of being accurate and striving after the truth, so I suppose to an extent you've already answered this question, but what do you think are the most important ethical qualities that a sports journalist should possess or seek to cultivate if they're going to do their job decently?

Int2: As I say, I do think you've got to come at it with an open mind. It can be tricky sometimes. You turn up and you think that so-and-so will be like this, or this story is like that. I think it helps to turn up with an open mind. It's all about integrity in the end. If you want a lengthy career, or even if you're not after a lengthy career but want people to take you remotely seriously or trust what you're writing, you need to take care that it's... If it's got your name at the top of it frankly, what you write is an extension of you. There is an argument - very early in my career an editor said to me, "When you phone somebody up for a quote, it's not you, [REDACTED], your phoning on behalf of, dot, dot, dot, whichever paper it is." And, you know, it's not about you. I was never quite sure about that to be honest. That's a device in a way to get people to do things they don't want to do. Clearly on occasion you have to call people you wouldn't necessarily want to talk to, but I personally still think it's important that whatever goes in under your name, you know, a) you're happy with, and b) you've done your best to ensure that it's, you know, as accurate as you can make it.

TB: You referred to what an editor had indicated to you or said to you there was maybe informing an approach. Where is it do you think that sports journalists acquire their professional values from? Is it from that professional, sort of, assimilated within a professional culture or, where do you think those values come from?

Int2: It's a good question. I think, I can only speak personally, I think they come from watching other people, you know journalists you admire and also – it does depend on who you work for. There's no question that some newspapers, we could probably all name, there's a rule of fear or certainly has been historically. And, you know, their reporters – “Blimey, we need to get a story here, otherwise either we'll be sacked, or shouted at or this, that or t'other – and that pressure, I'm reluctant to call it tabloid pressure given [REDACTED] [REDACTED] is now tabloid, you know, there are certain outlets where that pressure is higher than others. And I think that can warp, you know, the way some stories are reported, I think.

TB: And have you witnessed instances of tabloid sports journalists maybe making decisions or pursuing angles based on that kind of, as you say, sort of climate of fear?

Int2: I think it becomes very difficult to separate whether they're making decisions or it's just a decision... I don't know, there's at least one I can think of, probably more, tabloid journalists who've had, you know, mental issues – what am I trying to say? – nervous breakdown-type episodes and as a result have had to leave the profession for coming under that pressure. Admittedly this is historical, we're back in the eighties now, but yeah I think that culture has changed signif... I think a big deal, there are still pockets of it. But it was certainly very, very prevalent in my early years. And maybe if you're a younger journo, you are more junior and there are more people to shout at you.

TB: But you think the culture has perhaps changed generally now?

Int2: I think so because a) there's a lot more – we'll probably get onto it in a minute – your social media and what have you. You know, I think there's no question that if you report something unfairly or you do somebody down or if you're unprofessional I think your paper a) and b) yourself are more likely to be pulled up on it now, or it's perhaps more likely to receive wider attention now. Before it would have received attention in the industry or maybe with the individual, the complainant, but I think now, you know... *The Times* have just done a story today haven't they where they've had to publish an apology about the Christian Foster baby story, which is a big story but I wouldn't necessarily have known, unless you read *The Times* that they've had to issue this correction and suddenly it's all over social media – it's a big story, it's a big deal. So I think more attention is given to inaccurate stories these days although perversely there are many more inaccurate stories around, whose provenance you're not quite sure about. So, yeah, it is confusing but in terms of the culture, in written printed newspapers, call it Fleet Street, it has improved, probably because it had to. Probably because some of the murky stuff that we all know about has weeded out a few of the, few of the, I don't know... bad eggs, if you want to call them that.

TB: Yeah. Does the Editors' Code of Practice or other regulatory codes have any impact on your work? Is it something that looms large at all?

Int2: Well less so on me, you know, but I suppose by osmosis or by extension I think it definitely does on my editors and people up on the desk. Day-to-day for me, not so much because, you know, I'm not sure there's too many regulations about reporting rugby matches.

TB: So do you believe codes have a place or are they irrelevant, essential, or something else?

Int2: Sorry, codes?

TB: Yeah.

Int2: Ummm, I think if there's nothing it's just the Wild West, it's a free-for-all. I would say there's definitely a need for a code. How rigid it has to be depends on how much observance there is. I have to say I'm not entirely sure if [REDACTED] are in, what code they are in at the moment or not – it's like the darts, or the snooker or the boxing, isn't it, there are different bodies depending on who you want to sort of align yourself to. It wouldn't be at the forefront of my personal agenda but there's definitely a place for them, I'd say.

TB: Yeah. Do you think in a way that sports journalists, obviously there can be that sort of pack element to the way that stories are pursued and interviews conducted, do you think often in a way it's unwritten rules between peers that establish the kind of parameters of accepted journalistic behaviour rather than maybe codes dictating those standards?

Int2: Yeah, I think... I would have thought probably again in certain sections – you've got to be a little bit careful about the blanket, putting everything under the one umbrella. But I would say that, yeah, I'd say certainly day-to-day there's a, you know, if you know that your rival paper or your nearest competitor, put it that way, is running a certain story in a certain way then, yeah, of course, it's either pressure to make sure you... primarily the pressure is that people don't want to miss out, they don't want to be left behind, they don't want to be clutching a fig leaf while their competitors have got a full Saville Row suit, you know. So that's, if you want to call that a pressure, I think a driving force certainly for a lot of people, depending again on who they work for. It does matter. There are different pressure on *The Guardian* to where there are on *The Times* to where there are on *The Mail* to where there are on *The Sun*. There's no question about that. And I think that's still... it has shifted to a degree. I think all the papers have sort of moved to a position where they all have to... they're all under the same commercial pressures now probably in a way they maybe weren't before. In my personal... I think it's how you treat it. If fear is your, Christ, hell, God, if fear of failure is your main motivating factor for getting out of bed in the morning I don't think you're going to lead a particularly happy life. You might be fine for a bit but I don't think it's particularly healthy, personally. But then equally I know that's probably easier for me to say than other people in slightly more pressurised news reporting jobs.

TB: Yeah. Umm. And just moving on a little bit to now as you say to questions relating a little bit more to the era of social media and digital. What impact do you think the pressure to achieve those high audience figures, particularly online, has had on the content of sports journalism? Do you think, do you think the content has improved or has worsened as a consequence of the kind of rush, as it were, to try and get more eyeballs on stories?

Int2: Well I think it's definitely changed, I mean I'll give you an example from [REDACTED] where they've obviously gone to a, to a new shape – the paper. They now have – you know,

they've done all the research, obviously they're discovering people want, you know, shorter stories per se. But actually not, you know, the shorter and the longer stories are more popular and the stuff in the middle, you know, slightly goes by the wayside. We all get specific word lengths in a way we didn't get before, you know. Either 450 or 600 probably, you know, or 800, whereas before... So you're writing slightly less but that's probably because the paper's got shorter. Umm, in terms of the web, I mean, it is interesting. They've now decided that there are too many stories on [REDACTED] website. People can't read them all.

TB: Right.

Int2: So they've come to a rational, a rationalisation, a set figure of stories on sport per day. Now, err, I can't quite tell you what that is, I think it's in the thirties. But, you know, that's all sports and so that has a knock-on effect, you know. You're not writing four rugby stories as you once might have done, you know, so-and-so's got a bad leg or... all those on headlines on the web. They don't want so many headlines on the web anymore, they want fewer stories read by more people. Erm. So, yeah, to answer your question, it does change. But it fluctuates, a bit like a tide in a sea, you know. Nobody's got the answer to erm commercialising, what am I trying to say... monetising the web, other than Google, Facebook and all that who have got all the advertising. Umm, so yeah, everyone else is scrambling around trying to find the right solution and we're pawns, you know, in that I suppose, cogs in that.

TB: Yep, And I know you use some social media yourself in a professional capacity. Do you think the rise of social media has posed any fresh ethical issues for sports journalists? I mean there's obviously that ability now to interact with fans more directly now than ever before. I wonder whether they brings with it its own perils or ethical questions.

Int2: Umm. I, I don't think so. You'd have to be very Machiavellian, you know, I think it's an issue for the big data companies. Obviously, we know all about how they're using your data, how they may or may not, you know I think that's a whole different level. I think in terms of, I mean what are you going to... I don't know I'm, I'm the wrong person to ask I think. There may be younger reporters out there going 'Yeah I can really, sort of, get a lot from so and so's Facebook page or I can do this and that'. You know, I've never – I mean, I'm not even on Facebook, so I'm not the, I'm probably not the man to ask.

TB. Hmm. But in terms maybe of your use of Twitter, would you ever maybe, err, tailor a remark perhaps to, or moderate a remark, as it were for fear of maybe alienating certain readers or does it present kind of new questions around how your opinions are expressed, are you wary maybe of being too forceful in your expression of them? I just say this because obviously phenomena like trolling and abuse of journalists have been sort of documented and I wonder whether you've been at the sharp end of that at all?

Int2: Yeah well, no. I think the below the line stuff on the articles is, for me certainly, people are more... err, what's the word, uncomplimentary [laughs]

TB: [laughs] Free and frank.

Int2: They're... Twitter, you know, you're there and it's a... you can answer back if somebody is rude, you know. I personally would use Twitter purely professionally. I don't want my, you know, all my personal details and my family or what have you up on Twitter for everyone to see. I'm not that sort of person. Err, you know, I'm not... So I would only be using Twitter for, you know, essentially rugby – sport. And if I'm commenting on it, well, you know, there is an element of, well, if you've written something, and not everybody reads [REDACTED] so there's another audience out there, maybe they might want to read it, you know. There's a bit of that. I don't think, personally, I don't think getting into arguments on Twitter with people you don't know is a good use of your free time, personally. I think we should be very wary, all of us, there's no point trying to become a one-man news agency. I think that's a mistake, umm. Just because there's a life out there and, umm, I think actually, in the end, you're writing... You won't write as well if you're spending the whole time looking at the screen and getting into spats with other people. So, no, I'm, I'm, no, you know, the rules of Twitter are simple, isn't it? You just imagine your boss slash mother-in-law are reading it and you're probably fine.

TB: Interesting that concept of the one-man news agency that you referred to, do you think that because there is the 24/7 endless cycle of comment and content swirling around in the digital era, do you think, you know, some journalists do, or rather are at risk of being permanently turned on to that digital merry-go-round and therefore...

Int2: I think, yeah, you know, the one, two or three that I could probably, you know, I'm thinking of, umm, you know, it's not for their own gain. It's more that they're, you know, it's easy because you're already interested in the news by definition, newspapers interest us, new information interests us, we're just wired in that way. I love newspapers, I love finding out new things about things I don't know about, you know, that's part of the journalistic condition, I think. But I do think, it's like kids, isn't it, you need to put your phone down occasionally to retain any form of, well, just to live a life and to be aware there is a life out there. So, no, I think personally some of the, you know, unless you have someone paying you to put a tweet [laughs] which I don't think anybody is are they, you know, I think less is more personally, and I... it comes down to personal choice clearly, far be it for me to dictate to other people what they should or shouldn't do, I just think personally news organisations are laying off journalists and forcing people to work harder and harder, the ones who remain, and I think you're, perhaps people aren't doing themselves or their colleagues any justice if they're just tweeting 24/7 around the clock trying to, you know, writing 138 stories, you know, for free essentially, ermm, it's sort of in a way undermining the whole fabric of paid journalism, potentially. I mean, how do you prove it? Err, again, we're probably only talking a handful of people but, I don't know, unless you're a freelancer on the other hand how do you get noticed? So, if you're a freelancer and you're putting stories up for free on Twitter or tipping people off for stories without getting paid for them, well that's not really [unclear] either. So I think there is an ethical dilemma there if we're talking ethics about whether, yeah, the paid aspect of journalism, the trade, is... what would be the equivalent? I.. Are we, how are we best, what are we doing to ensure sports journalism remains as a job or a trade rather than just a hobby of people on social media? And I think that's probably quite a big question to which I don't have the answer. I think that's part of it.



TB: Yeah. Well I will touch on that shortly actually. Just finally around, well sticking with social media just briefly, I mean, obviously the phenomenon of fake news and issues around sort of verifying the reliability of content is something that crops up particularly in current affairs and political journalism but have you encountered any issues of that in sports journalism, maybe are sports journalists at increased risk of maybe being duped about certain stories due to rumours and stuff flying around online?

Int2: I think, I mean I think there, what you're mostly talking about – if we're talking about false sports stories what are we mostly talking about? We're talking about transfers, you know, in football or we're mostly talking about agent-driven speculation aren't we, in football and/or other sports. And, erm, we're mostly talking about money or sponsorship details or what have you. So I think, you know, a lot of these stories that aren't true emanate from people with an agenda, don't they? Erm, whether they're agents, whether they're other individuals. Umm, and I think that, yeah, that's definitely an issue. Or it is for me. I would be... I would think long and hard, if you run a story from one agent without getting the other side of the story you're automatically putting yourself, erm, putting yourself at risk of running a story that's not correct.

TB: Hmm. And quite a big question here and I think I already know the answer to this one, [REDACTED]. Have you ever breached the criminal law or ethical codes yourself in the course of your work as a sports journalist? And if you have, why?

Int2: [laughs] I'm just trying... I would expect not. Errr, I don't think so. If I have nobody's told me. *No, in all seriousness, no, not to my knowledge. I'd hope not.*

TB: Have you ever encountered behaviour, erm, from other sports journalists which, I mean, earlier on in the interview you mentioned about how, as far as you're aware, there's no phone hacking on the sports desk at [REDACTED]. But are you aware of any instances?

Int2: No, I mean no, I mean absolutely not. No. I, you know, there's... when you read about the fake sheikhs and what have you and they're all at the other end of the paper and, err, and they're all fairly... I think. I mean what are you talking about, are you talking about journalists taking money to write certain stories? Well, I've never encountered that. Erm, you know, and I... no. I can't think of, I can't think of anything... you know, betting, betting on, trying to influence... you know, I think, I think personally, again, I don't think anybody goes into sports journalism a) to get rich, they don't go into it to get famous, they go into it because they like writing and they like sport. I think if you tend to, I mean maybe there's some other motivations along the way but primarily you know, certainly, the ones I know in rugby, you know, they, they tend to love their sport, they're not there as I say for the wrong reasons. Maybe as I say I'm in rugby I'm not in a glitzier sport but, err, there's no question. You know, I would, *I could name you dozens and dozens of colleagues I've worked with, you know, and there's only one or two who you would think, blimey, they're a bit, they're a bit... you know their agendas might be different in terms of how they gather stories, they might be more ruthless, they might have fewer scruples in terms of what appears in the paper and upsetting people and you know have a thicker skin, but ummm having a thick skin isn't illegal.*



TB: [laughs] Good point. Connected with the concept of a thick skin, umm, do you think self-censorship by sports journalists is an issue in sports journalism, whereby – by self-censorship I mean, you know, the conscious decision by a sports journalist not to maybe publish a fact or maybe an honest opinion for, well, for any number of reasons; therefore sitting on stuff that they know to be true or that they know to be their honest opinion? Does that occur?

Int2: A problem for whom?

TB: Umm, well a problem in the sense that if they published it might, as you say, upset the source, it might jeopardise a relationship with a contact, umm, or maybe one reason is they might sit on something because, they might moderate an opinion in a column because they're, again, there are similar issues about upsetting people.

Int2: I'm, well, there's two ways of looking at that, isn't there? If you're saying do things not get reported that could get reported, well, of course, you know, and you go on a tour and somebody's drunk, you know, more than they might have done, umm, well, you know, for hundreds of years and/or many, many decades, you know, that was not an issue. It's more of an issue now, less with journalists and more people with cameras. You know, every player will tell you they've got, you know, in terms of people moderating or changing behaviour or keeping stuff hidden, you know, it's harder to do if someone's pointing a phone at you late at night. But in terms of, of, of not reporting stuff well a) there are libel laws, you don't want to, you know, you can get sued in this business. Umm, and also... You know, there's lots of things I could tell you about, about people I've covered and stories, and current issues, and what may or may not have happened with so-and-so or with England or what might be. You, you, you know, it's got to be in the public interest, frankly, to get in the paper, it's got to be accurate and not just somebody's hearsay – well, how do you prove that so-and-so's a, you know, you need two or three people to tell you to sometimes. If one person, one source, tells you that's not enough and, you, it's very hard to get two or three people to corroborate it. Well, you know, in a sense it's not easy to stand up all those stories and see... I don't think, I don't think it's a question of not, not putting a story out because you don't want to upset people. Umm, I think it's, going back to Peter Jackson, he had a great saying if somebody told him, he said 'News isn't when it happens, it's when it breaks' which has always stuck with me. You know, so if somebody tells you something in 2008, well, you know, and you didn't report it, well it doesn't mean to say it doesn't get reported until 2018 when you've got all the facts, if you see what I mean.

TB: Yeah.

Int2: Things will come out eventually. There is often a timing issue. Umm, you know, and actually that stands the test of time. If something's, you know, dubious and wasn't really worth reporting in 2008... I mean, it's an interesting question, isn't it. Windrush Generation, that example. Fantastic story, in the papers every day now. But six months ago the Government said there's nothing here, there's nothing to talk about. You know, so if you see what I mean, the climate almost has to be right for the story or for the situation, you know... The situation's ever-changing, which is a waffle way of saying that I don't think, you know, people don't... I always think you need to be fair to people. Things have got to be true

and you've got to be fair. I don't know, if necessary hard. I don't know, it's like anything... whoever you're dealing with, whatever job you're doing, I think if you're being unfair or you're being, umm, you know, what's the word, just, errr... I don't know, I just think if you're behaving unprofessionally to get the story or you're writing it in a way that, you know, is prejudicial or what have you, I think you'll get, it will rebound on you in the end.

TB: Hmm.

Int2: I think things like that do come around. I don't know, it's a tricky subject because of course I have to say in any business like, umm, a bit like, I was listening to something on the radio about this woman in a strip club yesterday on the radio, you know, and this journalist had gone undercover because she says, well, that's the only way people will talk honestly, you know, rather than talking to journalists you'll get, whatever, six-tenths of the story, you know, if you actually go undercover you'll get, you know, nearer 100 per cent. But then of course somebody phoned her up and said 'Hang on, this is wrong, I had a fantastic 15 years in strip clubs all around the world, you know, what are you talking about?' So, you know, what I'm trying to say is one person's story or hidden truth is probably somebody else's irrelevance.

TB: Yeah. And what about the extent of the influence of press officers these days on what you do or don't publish?

Int2: Well I think that is interesting, that's very interesting, because I think their role is changing. Even five or ten years ago they would have a certain autonomy in how they could deal with the media, who they could put up, what they could do. That's diminished I think, you know, almost year on year. **Access certainly to a leading side is getting less and less, umm, and more and more sanitized**, you know. And the press officers themselves, you'll be aware, a lot of them have moved on this year – I can't quite remember the figures but I think at least probably half of Premiership clubs have moved on and basically I think because, you know, the job is now unbelievably busy, ermm, sorry, I mean demanding in terms of the volume of web stuff and what they want to do, and also... I was talking to one, somebody the other day who's abandoned journalism, well, swapped journalism for PR, and he's going "Oh my God, I miss the writing and it's not quite what I thought it would be", you know. You've made your bed, you've got to lie in it. So I think, I don't think, yeah [laughs]. There's been quite a big change and probably not for the better in that particular role. **I think it's always been a tricky role and it's becoming harder and harder because I think clubs want, they want hermetically sealed, they want it all on social media or Man United TV, or whatever it might be. They want it all in-house and no dissenting voices. Because, you know, they've seen what social media can do for certain other people, pop stars or something, and they want the same.** So, no, I think there has been a problem and I think, you know, actually in a way it's good for journalists, for sports journalists to go, "Well, hang on a second, you know, we will redouble our efforts to try and, you know, put faces to in our cases athletes and tell the population – try and tell the population – something beyond the veneer that sponsorship or the commercial veneer or the PR veneer that's normally all that the public see".

TB: Yeah. Umm, so a connected question really is, in the past you might have been familiar with sports journalists sometimes being characterised as belonging to the “toy department” of news organisations and being, you know, “fans with typewriters” and cheerleaders...

Int2: ... And living in the pub! [Laughs]

TB: [Laughs]

Int2: ... anyway, the rest of it, yeah, yeah, no, keep going, keep going....

TB: Is it fair? Is that a fair assessment that the whole, you know, the idea of sports journalists being sort of cheerleaders rather than performing a sort of watchdog function?

Int2: I think that, I think that the first bit of that – the toy department, you know, the sort of self-deprecating, I think that was... was that somebody at *The Times*?... You know, somebody coined that phrase and it sort of stuck. Yeah, you’re not dealing with world wars or famine or, or great political dramas, and it is sport, so, yeah, by definition it’s not as serious. Fans with typewriters is a different matter. I think, I think, umm, you know, I don’t think any journalist would, would hold their hand up and say, “Look, that’s what I am” – not a proper journalist. You might be a fan of sport and use a typewriter but that’s slightly different, that’s a different distinction. Umm, you know, I’m just trying to think... I mean, I know there were those picture in the press box was it in Rome the other day where they had the big comeback, you know, and there’s all these journos jumping up and down and high-fiving themselves in the press box. Umm, you know, which begs two questions. One, why weren’t they filing a story, and b) umm, were they actually just journalists sitting in the seats, you know? I can only remember I think, you know, occasionally you see something that’s so extraordinary – was it Munster playing Gloucester? – you know, they subsequently called it the “Miracle Match” and you couldn’t... I remember banging the desk when they scored their fourth try or whatever it was with just a minute to go. Incredible, incredible story. You know, and you know that wasn’t neutral. But I’m an Englishman and they were beating an English club, you know, and it was, you know, it wasn’t supporting one team. It was the, you know, you can occasionally get swept up in the, in the sheer excitement of the occasion.

TB: Yeah.

Int2: But hopefully, you know, you have to bury that fairly quickly and write, tap out 800 half-decent words. Umm, so yeah, no, I definitely... I think, I actually think because journo jobs are, I think they are fewer and farer between, I mean you would know more about this than me, but I think because they’re pretty, err, sought after and as I say not many of them, I think the standard of journalism’s going up in many ways. Errm, I think the young journos coming in, a lot of them are very, very good indeed. Certainly, you know, certainly very well trained and certainly very well, you know, familiar with what they should be doing and the, and the job itself. I’ve not met any, personally, any young journos who I’d describe as just there for the ride, you know? Again, there’s no massive remuneration, you know, you can’t just cruise into it and expect it to happen, so no, I think that’s over... Fans with typewriters is an old phrase and I think it’s dragged out occasionally when people, you know, use too

many adjectives. I don't think, you know, I don't think anybody who actually came and sat in the press box next to a working journalist on deadline on a Friday night perhaps on a game that's just been decided by a drop-goal in the final minute, well then if you want to call them fans with typewriters then be my guest.

TB: Yeah. Do you think it's been the case in the past or maybe is the case now that, umm, maybe sports journalists spend too much time covering matches and press conferences, you know, working very much on-diary at the expense of perhaps doing more sort of off-diary, investigative, harder stuff as it were? Do you think the balance is right in sports journalism between on-diary and off-diary?

Int2: Again, I think you've got to be careful who you're talking about. If you're talking about national papers, if you're talking about magazines... local papers, you know, local papers.... I think without question, errr, but that's just a product of the times, you know, there's fewer people. There's a higher volume of stuff and with all the various angles that need to be covered, I mean, yeah without question you have to do the diary stuff because that's the sort of bread and butter, ummm, you know, if something happens, Leicester on a Tuesday, yesterday Manu Tuilagi or something he's back fit, well, that's a story, it has to be written, somebody's got to write it. You either go up to Leicester suddenly, so you've got a whole day, you know, doing let's say a couple of stories. You might call them average stories, but somebody needs to report them, ummm. I mean in a perfect world, yeah, of course, they'd give me two or three weeks off to go and do a special project somewhere and it would be fantastic, but the reality of the economics of journalism is that doesn't happen very often.

TB: Yeah, yeah. Could you describe your own experience of how the growth of digital and the increasing shift, emphasis on digital output has maybe affected your sense of, ummm, what it is to be a sports journalist and maybe what the expectations are of you as a sports journalist?

Int2: Umm, I think, I mean, you can... It's becoming increasingly hard to remember what it was like beforehand, but certainly, it certainly changes, you know, if all you had to do – I say "all you had to do" – but if let's say you're on tour in Australia with the time difference and what have you and you're writing a story, you file it into the ether and you don't have to write another one for, you know, send another one for 24 hours. It's very different to a 24-hour rolling news cycle, umm, you know, where actually anybody can want anything at any time of day frankly, or something can pop. So, you know, for example last year's Lions tour was unbelievably busy [laughs]. I mean we just, you know, morning, noon and night you're at it. Ummm. And, fantastic, what a great experience and it was a wonderful thing to cover. But you wouldn't work much harder than that six weeks, you know, whatever it was, without a day off. You know, it's become much more, much more demanding, the volume is higher, ummm. Yes there have been benefits. I think more people read your stuff without question, erm, with that comes, I don't know, I never know about profiles or anything like that, but people, I think people are more aware further afield of, of who might be writing the rugby for *The Telegraph* or *The Times*, umm, than they were. Umm, which is a good and a bad things, isn't it? But, errr, yeah, I think on the whole, on the whole I think it's been a good thing. It's easier to file through electronically, certainly. Digital stuff, your stuff gets to a wider audience. Ummm, it hasn't been good for the sale of hard copy papers, obviously,

but I think in terms of eyeballs, yeah, clearly, if more people are reading it the only trick is to get them to pay for it as well.

TB: Ummm, and you mention there about the burst of activity – intense activity – on tour, and also earlier you referred to maybe some journalists being, sort of, on-call as it were or switched on 24 hours a day, I mean, if I could put it like this, on a typical day now what's asked of you? Is it significantly different to what was asked of you a decade ago?

Int2: It fluctuates. It does depend on your boss, it does depend on how popular the sport you're covering is. Errr, it depends on, you know, a number of things. I would say, umm, I think the difference is they're sending fewer people. So it's certainly, you know, events abroad and/or, I don't know, I'm just trying to think, at home... primarily, **certainly touring, your workload is, you know, three or four times what it was.** I would say certainly the first tours I went on, you know, when you're just doing the odd piece here and there, ummm, you know, we worked hard but it's nothing like, we weren't up until four in the morning, you know, and then getting up at seven. It is relentless, maybe three or four is a slight exaggeration, but certainly two or three times more than we, than we used to do. Errr, at home, again, you know, it's the way of the world, isn't it? If you're lucky enough to hang around for a bit, you know, someone gives you a more senior job than sometimes you actually, it can be less because you don't have to do some of the, some of the more mundane stuff which you would have done as a junior reporter. So, yeah I wouldn't, I wouldn't, I remember [laughs]... I remember well my days covering, you know, doing seven match reports from the same match, you know, for different papers as a freelance, which doesn't happen anymore. Equally, there's more pressure on you to write a proper report, you know, now there's a slightly higher profile to it. There are different pressures. Ummm, but yeah, I, I would say without question, in answer to your question, **it has increased the workload digital-wise but that's in conjunction with other changes in the media industry.**

TB: Earlier on you spoke a bit about how, you know, what could we potentially do to ensure that sports journalism, good sports journalism, remains sort of viable and supported and there remains a sort of, that it's not undermined by people maybe working free of charge or putting stuff out there without being remunerated for it. I mean, I suppose that's connected with the question around whether you think, I mean, do you see sports journalism as being a profession, a trade or a craft? Umm, do you view it in a particular way when you approach your work, do you think you're focusing on it as somebody would do in a profession or is it more of a piece of craft that you're doing?

Int2: Ummm, I think it's possibly all those things but at different times, you know. When you're sitting there hunched over the typewriter, you know, it can feel like a craft if you've got a little bit of time. You know, [laughs] if it's, when you're bashing it out on deadline it's a trade, and when you're, when you're, I don't know, when you're sort of trying to look ahead and, or you're looking at your other contemporaries, you know, and working out... I think it's, it's, I'm always wary of calling it a profession, really, because we're not many of us equipped to do much else really so I don't know whether that, you know, makes it an active choice [both laugh]. Going into a posh-sounding profession it certainly isn't. I, I, you know, it's definitely a fun job, I think you'll find, you know, most people who go into it and are lucky enough to hang around for any length of time, it's, you know, great. It's a much more

fun job than, than many others I would, I suspect. You don't get paid near as much as you might like sometimes but, ummm, yeah, there are compensations.

TB: Yeah, yeah. Ummm, just a couple of questions to go now, [REDACTED]. In your own experience, I mean, how firm do you think the distinction is today between sports journalism and sports public relations. Is there still a firm and fast distinction?

Int2: That's a good question. I mean, I think there is but I think a lot of people would, you now, like to blur that line, you know. There's a lot of, you know, press officers.. there are press officers with columns in papers. Errr [laughs], staggeringly, which I hadn't come across before, ummm, in Ireland at the moment, ummm, and you're thinking, "Wow, how does that work?" So no, yeah, there's no question. You could say it's to the credit of certain individuals who are happy in front of a camera, you know, shooting a video interview, you know a former journalist maybe who's gone into PR, you know, who can multi-task. Well that's great, well done them. Fantastic. I do think there are issues. It's more a case of when papers and, ummm, organisations get too close together and, you know, you... some organisations would favour certain papers or give them preferential treatment or become a media partner or what have you, and I think that's where certainly perceived issues can arise. Ummm. But having said that, I think even that wheel might be turning. I think people realise that it's important to be seen to be, you know, your reputation matters, you know, and if you're in conversations, on both sides of the fence, and too cosy with somebody who should have frankly... But you can't be too close to certain, if you're a professional sports club you can't have the local newspaper as a partner, well, media partner. How does that work in the long term? Ulster would be interesting case study. Ulster Rugby, at the moment, you know, exactly that issue. They're suddenly banning news reporters from the press conferences. Now that's a disgrace in terms of media transparency. How do they get their reputation back for being honest and open, you know? So that's a really good case study I would have thought in that sort of area.

TB: And there's the point you say there of organisational sort of cosiness, between a media title and a club say, but what about individual cosiness? Are there moments when you think maybe, you know, you feel like you've got a little bit too cosy with a coach or captain say to the point of becoming complicit?

Int2: I don't think so. I think, personally, you've got to be very careful about that. You can be great mates or what have you but, I don't know, I would use the example of Stuart Lancaster who's a fantastic bloke, a very nice guy, errr, you know, we all I think as human beings liked him very much indeed, you know. Ummm, did I write a couple of nice pieces about Stuart? Yes. Did we have to write a story when they bombed out of the World Cup? Well, we had to write that as well. So, you know, it's part of the job as I see it to, you know, call it as you see it or as it is, ummm, you know, every time. And if occasionally that will entail writing stuff that perhaps people wouldn't want to hear, or, or, possibly upsetting people who you would have considered, you know, if not great mates then, you know, at least good acquaintances. So, you know, yeah, but that's an occupational hazard if you become a coach as well as a journalist.

TB: Yeah. You mention there about the ability, the courage as it were to call it as you see it every time, and my final question then is, today, what do you think are the essential characteristics that define a sports journalist in today's media environment?

Int2: Ummm, God, essential characteristics... Well I think luckily we all come in different shapes and sizes. I think it's a bit like rugby, you can be all sorts – you can be a good writer, you can be a good operator, you can be, you know, a brilliant photographer. You can be a, you know, a top broadcaster. There's all sorts of different ways to swing the cat. I wouldn't presume to say one is better than the other. I think in that sense, you know, there are more, slightly more avenues, you can do different things and specialise. I don't know. What was the last bit of the question again?

TB: Well I suppose the question was what you think are the essential characteristics that define a sports journalist on today's media environment, and I suppose implicit in that is the suggestion that maybe some of the characteristics have changed a little bit, you know, in the course of...

Int2: Yep, yep yep... I think, yeah, there's probably less room for essayists if you like, the sort of – what am I trying to say? – rambling, "leafy lane" journalism as Hewett would call it. It's probably, errr, less prevalent or less – there are fewer practitioners of leafy lane journalism, I'd say, than there used to be. You know, I would love to sit and write nice essays about cricket and football and rugby or whatever it might be, you know, go off the beaten track; those opportunities are fewer now, without question, because of the imperatives of web audiences, and clicks and what have you. They don't want to risk stories that nobody wants to read, umm, so they go after what they think people are most likely to read. So, yeah, I think in that sense it's become more... err, I don't want to call it harder-nosed... [inaudible].

TB: Sorry [redacted], I just lost you there for a few moments, you went a bit muffled.

Int2: Sorry, I wouldn't want to say they were harder-nosed than they used to be but they, because there were some hard-nosed people back in the day, but I think it's definitely changed. I think your whimsical columnist has probably bit the dust or increasingly bit the dust. There aren't many of them left. And, you know, personally I think that's a bit of a shame. I think you need all sorts of light and shade. Umm, I think as has been proven you still need a decent read as well as your short attention span, you know, bite-sized news chunks. So, yeah, it has changed. It's sort of evolved. But it's not to say that in five or ten years' time it could be that everyone's sick to death of staring at their screens and actually, you know, they want to get back to... look at vinyl, look at all the other retro trends that have come back. Maybe sort of leafy lane journalism might make a comeback.

TB: Yeah, yeah and just relatedly to that you mentioned earlier about a thick skin being required and a thick skin not being a crime, so you think that thick skin is required more than ever, or is it just an enduring constant really?

Int2: I think, I think it depends on your character to be honest. I mean I think also your level of experience. You know, it sounds easy to say, nobody likes, you write a piece and, you know, it gets slagged off by [laughs] left, right and centre. But in the end, you know, I think

you can dismiss it you know and just shrug your shoulders and go, God, look at... You know, brrrr, do you need a thicker skin than you used to? I think if you're a young journalist, and particularly a female journalist, I, I thing, again I'm probably not the right person to answer the question. I'm long enough in the tooth and maybe competitive enough within myself that I'm not too bothered frankly if somebody else thinks it's rubbish. Well, that's a shame, but, you know, hopefully there'll be one or two other people who enjoy it. So, you know, but I think if I was getting personal abuse, sexist abuse, racist abuse, on a consistent basis then that would be a different story.

TB: Hmm, hmm. Okay [REDACTED], that's great. Thank you very much.

### **Beta – Initial Distillation:**

- Traditional ethical view of facts having supremacy over opinions. “‘Comment is free facts are sacred’, which is CP Scott, and I think that for me is the guiding one, truth” (p1), tempered by the view of sports journalism is not dealing with life and death matters, and so not subject to the same level of ethical inquiry as news journalism: “We’re not in a war zone, we’re not in the House of Commons, we’re not, you know, necessarily at the front line of that sort of thing” (p1). A multi-faceted sense of duty emerges, although it is of note that the first duty that the participant mentions is the duty to the subjects of his work. “I’ve always thought you’ve got a duty to the people you’re writing about. I think it’s always useful to put yourself in the shoes of people you’re writing about. If you’re, I don’t know, a rugby player and you’ve had a bad game then it’s blatantly obvious, you know, to be personal in criticising an individual for having a bad game of rugby, you’ve got to be very careful how you do that. You’ve got a duty to the reader to tell the story fairly and you’ve probably got a duty to yourself or your newspaper depending on how you view it, or if you’re freelance, to tell the story again as accurately as possible” (p2).
- Through experience, participant suggests that he often knows instinctively what’s on the record/off the record. “I know, without almost having to ask, what you can put in, what it would be best to leave out for the subject’s, for his or her good, you know. Yeah, I don’t know, I mean I spoke to someone the other day and a number of very interesting ,potentially explosive, sort of quotes... We always discuss on the record and off the record but in this particular case I knew the bloke well enough that I don’t have to... You know, I would know what you could use and what you couldn’t use. Now maybe that would be different if you were a younger reporter” (p1). This suggests years of contact building, reporting on the ground, and nurturing trust leads to an acquired sense of what is fair. “There’s lots of things I could tell you about, about people I’ve covered and stories, and current issues, and what may or may not have happened with so-and-so or with England or what might be. You, you, you know, it’s got to be in the public interest, frankly, to get in the paper, it’s got to be accurate and not just somebody’s hearsay” (p8).
- Through pressure exerted by editors, the participant suggests a “rule of fear” can “warp” the way tabloid sports reporters cover stories. While this was more the case in the past (when it could lead to mental breakdowns) than it is now, “there are still pockets of it” (p3). Pressure is also something that is generated by being within the pack of sports reporters and not wanting to be scooped: “Primarily the pressure is that people don’t want to miss out, they don’t want to be left behind, they don’t want to be clutching a fig leaf while their competitors have got a full Saville Row suit” (p4).
- Participant believes social media leads to unfair or unprofessional reporting being called out, “So I think more attention is given to inaccurate stories these days”. But while social



media can facilitate sports journalists being held to account more effectively, “perversely there are many more inaccurate stories around, whose provenance you’re not quite sure about” (p3).

- Sense emerges that Twitter contains a number of perils, including time-wasting disputes and the temptation to try and deliver rolling news in one’s field. “I think we should be very wary, all of us, there’s no point trying to become a one-man news agency. I think that’s a mistake... You won’t write as well if you’re spending the whole time looking at the screen and getting into spats with other people... perhaps people aren’t doing themselves or their colleagues any justice if they’re just tweeting 24/7 around the clock trying to, you know, writing 138 stories, you know, for free essentially, erm, it’s sort of in a way undermining the whole fabric of paid journalism, potentially” (p6).
- The growth of digital and social media has led to a higher reach and profile, according to the participant. “I think more people read your stuff without question, erm, with that comes, I don’t know, I never know about profiles or anything like that, but people, I think people are more aware further afield of, of who might be writing the rugby for *The Telegraph* or *The Times*, umm, than they were” (p11). It has also led to a huge increase in workload, particularly when covering a major tour: “certainly touring, your workload is, you know, three or four times what it was” (p12).
- Clubs are harnessing social media to their benefit, and concomitantly seeking to silence critical voices and reduce journalists’ access. “Access certainly to a leading side is getting less and less, umm, and more and more sanitized... I think clubs want, they want hermetically sealed, they want it all on social media or Man United TV, or whatever it might be. They want it all in-house and no dissenting voices. Because, you know, they’ve seen what social media can do for certain other people, pop stars or something, and they want the same” (p9).
- Codes of practice are something to concern his editors and the sports desk, with it only affecting him “by osmosis” (p3). Unsure whether his title is signed up to either IPSO or Impress (“it’s like the darts, or the snooker or the boxing, isn’t it, there are different bodies depending on who you want to sort of align yourself to”) but is, however, supportive of their being a code of practice: “I think if there’s nothing it’s just the Wild West, it’s a free-for-all. I would say there’s definitely a need for a code” (p4). Supportive of the idea of a code in theory, but unclear on the practicalities.
- Unaware of any illegal behaviour by sports journalists, although some colleagues have “fewer scruples” in terms of their news-gathering techniques: “they might be more ruthless, they might have fewer scruples in terms of what appears in the paper and upsetting people and you know have a thicker skin, but ummm having a thick skin isn’t illegal” (p7).
- The participant’s title has reduced the amount of stories it publishes per day (“they want fewer stories read by more people”) but sense that the industry is still yet to find the right formula for the provision of online sports content: “It fluctuates, a bit like a tide in a sea, you know. Nobody’s got the answer to... monetising the web” (p5).
- Vigorously opposed to the notion of sports journalists as “fans with typewriters”. “I don’t think any journalist would, would hold their hand up and say, ‘Look, that’s what I am’ – not a proper journalist. You might be a fan of sport and use a typewriter but that’s slightly different, that’s a different distinction.” However, participant admits that love of sport can spill over in the “sheer excitement” of the spectacle and lead to a display of non-neutral behaviour, and gives a vivid instance: “I remember banging the desk when they scored their fourth try or whatever it was with just a minute to go. Incredible, incredible story. You know, and you know that wasn’t neutral. But I’m an Englishman and they were beating an English club, you know, and it was, you know, it wasn’t supporting one team. It was the, you know, you can occasionally get swept up in the, in

the sheer excitement of the occasion... But hopefully, you know, you have to bury that fairly quickly and write, tap out 800 half-decent words" (p10).

- The idea emerges of the participant regarding sports journalism as an increasingly diverse activity in the digital age, with the essential characteristics depending on one's focus. "There's all sorts of different ways to swing the cat. I wouldn't presume to say one is better than the other. I think in that sense, you know, there are more, slightly more avenues, you can do different things and specialise." However, there are fewer openings for reflective, finely-crafted prose due to digital demands. "There's probably less room for essayists if you like, the sort of – what am I trying to say? – rambling, "leafy lane" journalism... I would love to sit and write nice essays about cricket and football and rugby or whatever it might be, you know, go off the beaten track; those opportunities are fewer now, without question, because of the imperatives of web audiences, and clicks" (p15)

### Interviewee 3 - Gamma

#### Transcript:

Tom Bradshaw: So it's a general question to start with, which is, in your own experience – so it's personal experience – what are the main ethical issues affecting sports journalists in the course of their work?

Int3: I find that there's a lot less on a daily basis of ethical issues than there is on the news side of the business because a lot of sport, a lot of sports stories can almost be viewed as fun, you know, and there aren't often people's reputations and livelihoods on the line like there are with hard news stories. I don't find sport to be as ethically challenging as news but there obviously are instances where ethics are on the line. Erm, I suppose the main, the main decision you have to make is if you, if you're given something, if you're given a delicate piece of information about somebody, what are you going to do with it? How are you going to go about publishing it, who are you going to consult first, who are you going to give a right to reply? Erm, also, there's quite often a juggling act between being told stuff off the record because I don't like being told anything off the record because then if you find out off somebody else you're hamstrung and run the risk of betraying somebody else's trust. But it is a constant balancing act between using your contacts, protecting your contacts, never revealing your sources – which is what my policy is – and getting the job done. You know, there is a lot of pressure to get people to read your stuff. I think if you spend too much time tiptoeing around trying not to upset anybody then I don't think you'll be that successful. I remember when I was at university I was told that one of the main jobs of a newspaper is to print stories that people don't want printed. And then one of the first things I was told in my job as a sports journalist was if there's a story there you've got to do it, and another thing I was told was that you're not there to act as a positive PR tool for the club, you know, you're there to hold them to account, get to the bottom of stuff, find out what's really going on, make sure the fans are in the picture. Erm, so those are three things I took on board early on in my career. Erm, and I try to live by those rules if there is a story even if a lot of people aren't going to want you to write it, if it's fair, accurate and balanced then, then you've got to do the story. So there are a lot of situations in my work there where those situations come up, but not, I wouldn't say in sport as much as in news where it almost happens every day.

TB: So, you started off by saying that sports content can often be more fun, I think was the word you used, but then also latterly in that answer you also mentioned too the importance of being fearless in holding people to account. Is that, is there not a tension there or is it that the holding to account stuff is maybe very much a minority of the kind of work that you do whereas the fun stuff as it were is much more frequent?

Int3: Yeah, I think a lot of the stuff that comes out from our sportsdesk isn't going to affect anybody. Erm, you know, about as bad as it gets is that somebody's had a bad game, or a fan having a pop at somebody for their performance, you know, it doesn't feel as life and death situations as some of the court cases we cover and the crime stories that we cover. Umm. So, there are serious issues in sport obviously but I don't think it's as likely to crop up as it is on the news. When I'm sat at my desk writing something that seems so

inconsequential compared with some of the stuff the people on the newsdesk just behind are talking about, some of the serious crimes and real big issues in the towns of [REDACTED] – knife crime, and things like that – and I'm sitting there writing about whether somebody should have cleared a ball or not, it doesn't seem as, you know, it doesn't seem as serious. But there are people's livelihoods at stake in regard to if somebody's not performing and you highlight that, then I suppose you can, you can actually have an effect on somebody's living. But it doesn't seem to be as, a lot of it does seem like it's what people do in their leisure time, they enjoy having an opinion on it but really it's just for fun.

TB: Yeah. Umm, notwithstanding that, can you describe the most recent example of an ethical dilemma that's confronted you as a sports journalist, as a sports editor?

Int3: Yes, the most recent example that crops to mind is [REDACTED]. We were waiting outside the tunnel to do our interviews and there was a commotion in the tunnel, and one of the [REDACTED] players was being dragged down the tunnel by one of his teammates, past the media and out on to the pitch, and he, you know, was livid about something. So, everybody saw it but nobody knew what the cause was, umm, so that was what I saw. I needed to find out what had happened because everybody there had seen it. Erm. So I was told there was a flashpoint in the changing room between the manager and the player, and the player and the manager went for each other in inverted commas, as in almost, had to be pulled apart physically. Umm, that's when the player had to be dragged out on to the pitch. So, my dilemma was how much, how much of that can I report? How much of it do I know is true, and how much of it is just relying on one person's account, which, who may have an agenda? Umm, so I, that was a bit of a, I had to weigh that up, and in the end I reported that there was dressing room incident which resulted in exactly what I saw with my own eyes, which I'm 100 per cent sure was true. But I didn't actually reveal what I'd been told, that they'd almost had a fight, basically. So that was, yeah, that was... people knew something had happened but I couldn't fill in the gaps, I wasn't in there, and I hadn't spoken to either of the parties involved, so I basically weighed that up and that was what was reported and I didn't report anything further.

TB: Umm, what about – you alluded to it in your first answer that there was pressure to have eyeballs on your stories online. When an incident like that happens, there's obviously potential for, you know, a juicy online headline potentially around a story, umm, is the pressure to have a successful story online, does that colour your approach to how you go about verifying, fact-checking, stories? Can you be a bit more cavalier in the digital age with that fact-checking or is it more important than ever?

Int3: I don't think you can be more cavalier now than it was when it was just print. I think you still have to be very careful, erm, possibly more so, because – you touched on it earlier – I think you, you still have to be seen as the reliable source, umm, not somebody who's going to be carried away by their emotions when they're reporting on something, not somebody who's going to act like a fan. And what it all boils down to for me, and the biggest change, is as clubs' media departments have grown, I think late noughties it was when it started speeding up, when you suddenly found each club had a decent amount of media output from the inside, the biggest challenge is offering something different to the club. So,

that has had a massive impact on my style of coverage, but I don't think it means you can take more risks, because I don't think it matters where something's published, whether it's social media, on a website or in a paper, it's still the same ramifications if you write something that's defamatory or just unfair, so I don't think that's, although there's pressure to get web hits, I try to avoid writing sensationalist headlines which don't give readers what they expect when they click on it. Umm, the word clickbait gets used a lot and thrown a lot at journalists, but I think clickbait isn't writing an intriguing headline that's trying to get people to click on it, that's just doing your job. Writing a headline that's completely misleading, over the top, and then doesn't give you what you want, that's clickbait and that's what I try and stay away from. You know, I think there's a big difference between those two, and I discuss this with a lot of readers, ummm, whether they're directing it at me or other journalists I'm quite sensitive about the word "clickbait" because I think not giving it all away in a headline is just common sense as a journalist, it doesn't mean it's clickbait, it means it's trying to get people to read your stories, as you would in the print product when there's a headline that grabs your attention, it's got to be the same. It is probably harder to get people's attention now with there being so much stuff out there in the digital world.

TB: Yeah. And so do you think the emergence of that, sort of, word 'clickbait' has become almost an easy accusation for, maybe, audience, disgruntled readers, whatever reasons, to throw at journalists? Is that your experience?

Int3: Yeah, I think it's thrown around a lot and I think there are a lot of examples that I can think of where newspapers are panicking, desperate for people to read stuff, and they basically are trying to almost trick people in. That's not what I think is the way forward. So, but I think it is easy to just say, "Well, that's clickbait". Ermm, but there is a, there's two sides to it, one side is just a good headline – a good headline should tempt you to read it, as long as it's not misleading and as long as it's not, you know, "Man turns into a blancmange" and you click on it and it's just something completely different, that's the sort of thing you see all over the internet. That's what newspapers can't get involved in. That sort of, just utter desperation to get clicks for anything, at all costs. I still think you have to, you have to be honest, fair and the headline should be a fair representation of what you're writing about.

TB: Sticking with ethics, do you think a sports journalist has duties, and if they do have duties, to who, to whom do they owe those duties?

Int3: I think the biggest, the person that I feel like I'm representing is, is the supporters because that offering something different to the club has become so much more important now, because if you look at the club content it's going to be hopefully good quality content, the higher you go up the more media output there is from Premier League clubs down. They're all producing nicely packaged interviews with players, they've got 100 per cent player access, they've got, they can, they can produce a good digital offering, but what they're not doing is, they're never going to hold themselves to account. So you're there almost now to be the fan that wants to find out what's really going on, address issues at the club, if there's anything the fans aren't happy about, I mean, the... The role of a sports journalist, especially with a lower league club, is almost, almost can be compared to a sort of supporters' group. So you're trying to offer fan opinion, what are the issues that the fans

care about, what do they want to find out, what do they want to read about? Ermm, so you've got to tap into that. So I think I've a responsibility to fans to uncover the issues that they feel are important.

TB: And that perception that you have, that perspective that you now take, is probably one that's been triggered by changes in digital technology...

Int3: Yeah...

TB: ... that's enabled clubs to have their own channels, have their own kind of mouthpieces, but there's still then that slightly altered role that you need to fill as the sports journalist?

Int3: I think the competition's changed from being rival newspapers to being media against club media, offering something different. Umm, they can both work together very well but they can't, you can't just regurgitate what the clubs are producing anymore. So, err, I was just talking to [redacted] then about players interviews, you have to work hard to make somebody want to read a player interview now because a lot of it's just predictable hot air that they can see somewhere else or read somewhere else. If you just go through the motions and do what may have been seen as a decent article in a newspaper 20 years ago it's not going to cut it digitally now. So the competition's changed. You've also got the situation where you are publishing stories straight to web instantly with no other pair of eyes reading it. That's, I'm sure you were going to ask me about that anyway, but there's no, there's no system now of writer, editor, sub, publish. Nearly every story that I write, it's not being read by anybody else before it goes live, because it's unrealistic to have that delay, so that's, I think that's a massive change as well. So, in the days of [redacted], she used to read every word of the paper before it went to print, so the next day when the paper came out she'd seen every word of it, she was responsible for it as the editor. My editor now has put me in a position of responsibility where I'm responsible for all the sports coverage, so she won't know what's about to be published on the website that she's the editor of. So that's a massive change, I think, and that's, umm, gone through various different stages from print to then all the stories in the paper automatically appearing on the website, to then, probably for the last eight years just publishing stories directly to web yourself without any process.

TB: Yeah that does connect with my next question really which is, umm, in your experience, umm, what are the most important... *[brief interruption by colleague entering room]*

Int3: I've just thought of another good example, Tom, that I'd like to mention...

TB: Oh yeah? Jump in...

Int3: ... which is probably one of the most interesting ones of the season. It was a, a [redacted] player contacted me to say that he had been, umm, put on the transfer list by [redacted] and been made to pay for his own cruciate knee ligament operation. Ermm, I didn't know the guy, I'd never met him before, I didn't know anything about him other than the fact that he was a footballer. So, but I obviously saw the chance for a potentially good story. That was another major dilemma that I had this season. So, the only route really

down for that one was to contact the club, tell them the situation, give them the right to reply, because I think that is, that would have been completely unfair to publish without asking the club first, whereas I think the [REDACTED] dressing room incident, nobody can argue with what I wrote because I saw it with my own eyes. The knee operation one I was completely going on one person's word, no evidence to support it at all. So that was an interesting one, and that was the last story where I actually had to send it to our lawyers to check before I published it. So we have got lawyers that we can contact 24/7 that we can send a story to, they'll check it over before it gets published, so even though most of our stories go straight on without a second's thought, that one obviously, from media law, it definitely needed a once over to make sure it wasn't, ummm, defamatory or, ummm, but they gave me a response, they read it, they gave me a response and I published the story, so... But that was a very rare situation where I needed to get the lawyers involved with a sports story.

TB: Hmm, thanks for that example, it's a good one. I was going to ask you, umm, what you feel in your experience are the most important ethical qualities that a sports should have or at least seek to cultivate?

Int3: I think you can, you can get a few quick super hits by making stuff up, by just making ridiculous stories, exaggerating everything, speculating about stuff that's never going to happen but it won't be sustainable, that's, you can, you can probably get everybody to your website once by making up a ridiculous, sort of, speculative story, but I think the only way to get a loyal audience, especially a loyal local returning audience, is to be trusted. So, if people see speculation around stuff elsewhere the ideal scenario is they'll, they'll wonder about it, and when they read your account of it that's when they'll believe it, because your reputation is a trusted journalist. So I think you need to be fair, honest, balanced, accurate, meticulously fact-checking all the time. And if you do that over a sustained period of time I think you build up a reputation as an honest and reliable journalist.

TB: Umm. So you've mentioned there about the importance of, umm, accuracy, fact-checking – truthfulness effectively. Umm, where is it that you think that journalists – sports journalists – acquire those, those, erm, qualities or those attitudes towards their behaviour as sports journalists? Do you think they're in a sense personal values or values that are shared by fellow members of staff that maybe kind of seep in? Where do you think the, sort of, journalistic sense of value comes from?

Int3: I think it's a bit of both. I think, err, you want, I think it's a lot more about the personality of the journalist now than it used to be in the days of print. I think Henry Winter is a good example, because I think – we might have discussed it before – Henry Winter was a major personality at *The Telegraph*, built up a massive online following, and then he moved to *The Times*, and all that really changed was the fact he was working for *The Times* now. His writing style didn't change, his Twitter didn't change, they just, he just moved his followers over from one website to another. So he wouldn't have built that following at the *Telegraph* if he hadn't have been a long-standing, reliable, respected journalist. So I think you need to build up your reputation over a period of time, umm, build up a loyal readership, build up a loyal social media following, but you also have to represent the company you're working for and the company that's paying your salary and make sure their

reputation isn't damaged. But, umm, my editor often says to me that if you're not falling out, if you're not falling out with clubs every now and then you're not doing your job properly. So she knows that there are stories that we have to do that the club, whichever club it is, won't like. But that doesn't mean we don't, we're not always conscious of maintaining our reputation, but we... I think that if you don't, if you don't try and delve underneath the surface you get, you lose credibility as well, almost as much as if you're constantly at the throat of a club. Ermm, so I think you've got to be very careful about your own reputation, very careful about the company your representing's reputation, and the industry as a whole, because it is challenging times for sports journalism and I think you can easily undo a lot of good work with some poor decisions.

TB: You mentioned there about the perspective of your editor, talking about how actually if we're not putting the occasional nose out of joint then there's probably something not quite right with the depth of the journalism. Do you think editors – I think you've worked under quite a few of them – do you think they generally set the tone for the kind of values of the paper or, or do you think otherwise?

Int3: I think some are braver than others, some will push the boundaries further than others. But I think you almost have to, to push the boundaries now because of the different challenges that are popping up. So I think the editor does have an impact on the way people work but I think a good editor will give you the freedom to work in a way that you feel right as long as it's not damaging the reputation of the company.

TB: What boundaries are you referring to there in terms of pushing the boundaries?

Int3: How far you willing to take stories that... she's, she's made it clear to me, my editor, in no uncertain terms that she will back us if, if we are doing our jobs, even if we're threatened with banning. Whereas I think in the past, people would have been terrified to be banned because they knew, they needed to be there, they needed the club, whereas now I think you can almost take risks because you can, you can provide new coverage without being anywhere near the club. And that's, that comes down to offering something different to the club media. So I think... I said earlier that the risks are the same wherever you publish something, but I think there are more risks being taken because I think it's less important to have a really close relationship. In an ideal world you'd have a really close relationship but I think it's less important to now because you can, you can be the voice of the fans without being under the thumb of the club.

TB: I see, thank you. I mentioned an individual editor there. What about the, umm, the editors' code of practice? Umm, it's a document, or it's a list of I suppose obligations journalists should fulfil, umm, I know it's been something that's been pushed out there by a number of organisations over the years – the Press Complaints Commission, now we've got the Independent Press Standards Organisation. Err, does it have, what bearing does that have on your practice as a sports journalist?

Int3: We've all got the terms on our desks, they're on a little card if we need to refer to them.



TB: Yeah.

Int3: Umm, I think the most, the most important thing there is to give people the right to reply. Whatever you're going to write about them, they're allowed to have their say, they're allowed to respond to anything you're going to put them. I think that's something that pops up quite regularly. Umm...

TB: So you'd get a response prior to publication, or...

Int3: I think that's case by case...

TB: Yep...

Int3: Case by case. I think certain stories you need to get, you very much need to get both sides of the story before you publish. Whereas with other stories you might have enough evidence to be confident of publishing, but the person in question should always have a right to reply.

TB: Umm, so do you think that **codes**, such as the Editors' Code of Practice, have their place, or do you think they're essential, do you think they're irrelevant? How do you rate them?

Int3: I think it almost boils down to the law now. Media law, umm, rather than less formal guidelines, I think that's... It's almost, you can push it as far as you want as long as you're not breaking the law, as long as there's no legal issues.

TB: So the Editors' Code of Practice is, is an unneeded extra layer or is just something that doesn't really register? It's just media law as far as you're concerned...

Int3: I think it's, it's worth having as guidelines but I think there will be times when you really have to push the boundaries of them.

TB: Have you ever done? Can you give an example of how you might have done that?

Int3: Umm... The last time I think I was involved in a real delicate issue like this was when, umm, [REDACTED] was [REDACTED] manager and he was, he was accused of racially abusing a bouncer outside a nightclub. And the nightclub phoned us up and told us their account of the situation, and they said they had CCTV evidence. Umm, so we went to the club and the club, the manager, even denied being there that night. Umm... he was questioned by the police after we'd done the story, so we did go to them, we went to the club, we went to the manager, we asked them for their side of it. Umm, he was questioned by the police and the bouncer who was racially abused decided that he didn't want to take it any further, he didn't want to press charges, even though there was a lot of evidence that would have given him a pretty strong case. And then we were then made to look like we'd unfairly written the story. But the story was true as everything was there to suggest the story was true. Umm, and I think there were threats of legal action from [REDACTED] team but it didn't happen because I think he knew that if he tried to, obviously the truth justification would have come into play. But that was a difficult one, the editor at the time

was very... I would say, reluctant and cautious and didn't really want to touch it, but we pushed for it, and he actually lost his job because of it, the manager, umm, because of that incident. He was placed on gardening leave and then he was, he was, they came to a settlement. And the agreement of the settlement was... no more will be said about you [REDACTED]. So...

TB: And you were privy to that? Obviously you have been somehow privy to that?

Int3: The club, the club came to an agreement with [REDACTED], umm, that he, he wouldn't take as much money as he was owed, umm, he could have pushed for more money, but they would come out publicly and say that he was cleared of all racist allegations.

TB: Cleared...

Int3: He was cleared...

TB: Right, ok, yeah...

Int3: The club said, the club came out and said that as part of the settlement.

TB: Ok. So there was a tension between how much they paid him and what they, what they put on the record?

Int3: No, they... basically he agreed to take a lot less than he was, he was owed, if they came out and...

TB: Right...

Int3: ... publicly said he wasn't a racist basically.

TB: Ok.

Int3: That was a very complex issue because he, he... it was stopped by the bouncer saying he didn't want to take it any further, not due to a lack of evidence or... It was all there on CCTV. The police were aware of it. He was, he was, umm, he shouldn't have been there anyway, you know. He denied being there anyway. Umm, but that was a difficult one for the paper to know how to handle I think. And that was a massive crossover between the news reporters and the sports desk. Umm, but in the end we ran the story on the front page – that he was, umm, that he had been accused of being, of racially abusing somebody. So that was, I think that was probably the biggest legal implications story that I've been involved in since I've been in journalism.

TB: Yeah, ok. Thanks. Umm, we touched on this earlier but what – maybe you could elaborate on this a little bit – what impact do you think that the pressure to achieve high online audience figures has had on the content of sports journalism?

Int3: Ummm...

TB: That could be the quantity and quality of it.

Int3: Yeah. I'd say there's a lot more shorter, sharper, snappy stories going online on a more regular basis, and it's quite hard to justify spending masses of times on a piece, ummm. Although there's just been some evidence to suggest people still want long reads, I think the average word count has come down a lot. In the past you'd have been asked or told how many words a story should be for print, now that's irrelevant now. Word count isn't something... it's a case of how long does it need to be, rather than trying to fit things into boxes now. So, that's made a big change, umm, deadlines aren't really that come into play in my job anymore....

TB: Apart from the need to be quick?

Int3: Yeah. Well, in terms of one deadline a day that you're working towards, or one deadline a week that you're working towards, now you're often racing to get stuff out before the club. So you have to be able to work really quickly and almost, I think it's almost better to get something out quickly that's a bit rough around the edges than it is to second with something that's more polished. But if you've got the skills hopefully you can do both and produce something that's both polished and first out. Erm, but speed, speed, probably less words but more stories. And it's sort of 24/7 now. Somebody will be ready to spring into life and put a story on our website at any point of the day or night, rather than print you would reach deadline, finish the day, and then start again the next day.

TB: And what about the overall quality of content, how's that been affected?

Int3: Erm, I think the business has trimmed a lot of the fat off, in my opinion, and you... so the quality is hopefully still there, but the speed and the... when I started you'd write a story, the story would be subbed on screen, then it would be subbed on the page, and then it would be proof-read as a hard copy. So that obviously minimises the chances of mistakes, so I think the chances of there being typos on online stories are much higher, but you can't have those barriers now. I think Henry Winter was talking about, he was at a press conference live tweeting and I think television stations still have to put things through a fact-checking system even if it's live happening at a press conference, so they... he, he is at a massive advantage as a newspaper journalist because he can tweet live as it's happening, whereas some other companies and businesses have got to go through a process that just slows them down. So a massive amount of it is speed. But I think the quality is still high, umm, because I think that the journalists who struggle to match speed and quality, a lot of them will have gone, I think.

TB: One of the facets obviously of digital technology and how it's impacted sports journalism has been the rise of social media, and do you think that the rise in journalists using social media and being exposed to social media has given rise to any additional ethical issues for you?

Int3: I think it's had the biggest impact of anything since I've started as a sports journalist - social media. Um, I think the biggest issue there is that you're tweeting as yourself - it's

your account, it's nothing really to do with the company you're representing – but you.... A lot of people put that the views are their own on social media. I don't put that on social media because I don't think I'd say anything different whether I was representing the company or if they were my own. So I don't think I need to put that on mine but I have got the company website on my Twitter but... Twitter is probably dangerous, it can be dangerous I think, if you, if you start tweeting in a certain mood or at a certain time of day, or if you've had a few drinks, it's always there on your phone, it's always a risk to be tweeting if you're not in a clear frame of mind.

TB: Isn't that the same though for a member of the public as it is for a sports journalist? I mean, people often say, you know, I should never – and this is just a member of the public speaking here – a friend says you should never go on Facebook or Twitter on a Friday night after a bottle of wine because I can't trust myself. I mean, you're talking there about sports journalists on the sort of, having sort of optimal times as it were to be engaging with social media and when they shouldn't be. Is that what you're...

Int3: I just think that my Twitter account is not somewhere where I should be writing about personal stuff, writing when I'm not in the right frame of mind, because I think it's, it's relied upon by a lot of people for sports news. So I've, well, I don't drink anyway, so that helps, but I would never put anything on there that I think would spoil my standing as a respected, trusted journalist. But it is always there and there's nobody going to be able to stop you getting the phone out of your pocket and.... Like, you're right, it's the same for everyone but I think if you're using your own Twitter account as a first port of call for a lot of your readers I think you need to be more careful. You could easily put something that you regret on there in a split second, whereas I think you're very unlikely to do that in a story, certainly a newspaper story or even an online story, you have more time to think about it and draw breath whereas with Twitter everything's so instant that somebody can say something to you and you can just snap. I think that's an ethical issue because it's so instant and suddenly thousands of people are going to see it. Even if you delete it pretty much straight away it's out there, it's going to be screenshotted. I think a lot of people have said things they've regretted, I think Kevin Pietersen was the first one. I remember he put something on social media that I think was supposed to be a direct message and got himself into a lot of trouble

TB: Have you got some examples from your own personal experience? In a sporting context?

Int3: Umm, I don't think I've ever had to delete anything on Twitter. I'm very, very careful about what and when I tweet. No, I think I've always managed to I think sort of self-edit my Twitter and I think for that reason I think I've got a good Twitter following that will believe what I say, because I can't think of any examples where I've had to backtrack or delete or get involved in any silly spats – healthy debate is great but I think it's just, it's completely different from turning up at an office and being sat at your desk and working to 24/7 you've got Twitter and I've got my Twitter account there at any point. I could just say something there at the wrong time if, if you caught me at the wrong time. There's the risk there. I can't think of any examples where I've, um, the only one I can think of is where I made a typo in the tweet and deleted it and wrote it again with the right spelling. I don't think I've ever had

to completely apologise or backtrack. I'm always happy to listen to other people's opinions and things like that without it ever getting personal.

TB: You mentioned there the concept of self-editing. What is it there that you think you need to edit there. Is it just a case of mistakes of grammar or spelling, or is it sometimes that you feel like you do hold back on voicing certain opinions. It might be your honestly held opinion at the time but in certain circumstances would you maybe sit on that?

Int3: I think it's sort of comparable to if you're a fan of a team and you're reporting a game, you don't stand up in the press box and start shouting and screaming when a goal goes in. I think it's a bit like that. With Twitter you can't act like an emotional fan. You've got to be passionate about it and you've got to reflect the fans' views but I don't think you can behave like a fan. You can't, err, you have to have some restraint there. There's a line as a journalist between... you know, and I think it's similar to journalists celebrating in press boxes, which I'm very anti. And it's a bit like that on Twitter as well.

TB: So the notion of restraint there and sort of self-editing is almost linked to professionalism in a way. You're not showing an outpouring of joy unconfined that a supporter would show, but instead I suppose you're retaining that, what would you call it, detachment or sort of objectivity?

Int3: Yeah. This is an interesting one because you do want to be seen as joyous when the team you're covering, you want to be, there's nothing wrong with wanting the team you're covering to do well. But I think you have to just take some of the emotion out of it and act as almost the sort of middle ground between all the opinions that are coming round. Be like a forum without forcing too much of your personal issues and emotion on, especially straight after a game. Straight after a game fans are absolutely either livid or ecstatic or things like that. That's when you don't want to start tweeting stuff that's just going to get a terrible reaction from people who've just seen a damaging defeat or something like that. But, so I try and save those opinions for considered pieces which I'll put in... So there's time for opinion, there's time for emotion in your work but not, I think with Twitter you have to be, you have to restrain the fandom a little bit I think as a reporter.

TB: And fake news is a concept we hear thrown around a lot and debates surrounding journalism ethics. But do you think it has much application to sports journalism? How much of a place does disinformation or lack of verification by journalists play in sports journalism newsrooms today in your experience?

Int3: Having a verified Twitter account definitely helps with that, but I think with the... you can read something online and everyone can get an alert from social media or find it through Google and it can be really well written, and they can read it, digest it and just take it as fact without ever considering where it's come from, and I've seen examples of that where there's been completely false sports stories, just completely wrong, completely inaccurate. But that's where I think journalists, professional journalists that are trying to do the job the right way, come into their own because they are a trusted source. There are so many sources that are independent that can write something completely out of the blue with no facts, they are not even based on any kind of facts. I think it's, people will

increasingly need places where they can go where they can trust. And I think the leading light for me has been the BBC, because the BBC will not print a story unless they've checked it with two or three different sources, I think. So I think that sets the standard for truth because it's not affected by any commercial factors, in this country anyway.

TB: Do you think – obviously we're talking in a sports journalism context here – do you think that helps having the BBC there then, obviously quite a traditional company, having the BBC there, umm, at a time when we've got an eruption of other outlets and things, do you think the BBC helps to keep the industry honest in a way and helps prevent a kind of escalation of...

Int3: Yeah, I'm very pro-BBC and I think the BBC sets the standard and then there's a kind of sliding scale between quality newspapers, tabloids, and then all the other stuff that's developing, some of which is good and some of which there's no truth in it at all. But I think the (coughs), excuse me, the job a newspapers, the job of *The Sun*, is very different to the job of the BBC. People will happily read a page of just speculation on sport – transfer speculation – not expecting it all to come off, they just want to read what might be happening. And the BBC do a gossip page which is just links to all the newspaper talk, but it's not their own stuff. If you read something on the BBC you know it's going to be absolutely fair and accurate. So I think there's a hell of a lot more stuff out there – sorry I've got a bit of tickle...

TB... Do you want some water? I can get you some more in a minute.

Int3: And I think newspapers, I think Henry Winter could go out alone now and still have that trusted following whether he's working for *The Telegraph*, *The Times* or just his own website or Twitter, he's got that following – people know it's going to be believable, accurate and based on fact.

TB: And that is despite the fact you were saying the BBC serves as a sort of benchmark for sort of reliability, as a brand that people trust. I mean, it can be a case now can it that individuals can earn that sort of sense of trust just through the accuracy and ongoing truthfulness of their coverage? Henry Winter has that status. And again that's a facet I suppose, that's something that's arisen as a consequence of the era of social media and digital communication.

Int3: I think he's got it now and he won't lose it because... but I don't think he'd have got it if he hadn't been at the *Telegraph* and that's where he's built his reputation – as a *Telegraph* journalist. Now he's got the following he's in a very powerful position but I don't think he'd have been able to start that from scratch without the name of the *Telegraph* behind him.

TB: Umm, in your experience working as a sports journalist, have you ever come across behaviour that is either illegal or that's broken an ethical code? It could be from anybody. Have you heard stories about...

Int3: Yeah, yeah I've heard... well, no. I've heard of illegal activities in football which, umm, which haven't been reported, umm. I can't think of any examples where I've been privy to a sports journalist being, doing anything illegal. Umm.

TB: What about the fact that if sports journalists had been aware of illegal behaviour taking place in sport and they haven't covered it? I mean, is that in some sense a breach of the Editors' Code? Is it derelict in respect of the duty of reporting truthfully and accurately?

Int3: I know, I know of journalists who pay for stories.

TB: Sports journalists?

Int3: Yeah, who pay money to people for information. Umm, but that's about as far as it goes really, I think.

TB: How does that sit with you?

Int3: It's not something I've ever done. When I was at university one of my lecturers used to tell us stories of when he was a young trainee, umm, and he would slip somebody a fiver to let him in somewhere or to get him a chat with somebody. So, umm. That is a difficult one. Umm, I don't like it. I can't see myself doing it and I think it's a bit, yeah, I think that's ethically wrong.

TB: Is that because it potentially contaminates the journalist-source sort of relationship once money starts changing hands, or?

Int3: Yeah. I think whenever you've got money involved you've got, it goes down the... it's more likely to get corrupt or controlled by things that aren't making it as accurate or impartial as it should be.

TB: Um, do you think – you mentioned the word 'corruption' there – do you think, umm, sports journalists in any way can be described – some sports journalists can be described – as being corrupt in as much as their relationships with the clubs they're covering, or maybe the particular manager who they're in with, is too cosy? That they almost become complicit or an extension of that club? Does that happen?

Int3: It does happen but I wouldn't describe that as corruption. I'd describe it as weak journalism, or impotent journalism, not corrupt journalism. Because I think almost every, every media outlet – almost every media outlet – is influenced by commercial pressures, the BBC probably being the example – the exception, sorry. Umm, I think it's more important now than ever to not be too cosy. Err, Manchester United's reporter under Ferguson was – I think he had a weekly chat with Ferguson off the record, where he'd get everything – and then he wasn't allowed to report any of it. So he had a really close relationship with Ferguson but he didn't really get anything out of it himself. He always knew what was going on but he was told off the record so he was stuck.

TB: Sorry, who's this?

Int3: This was the *Manchester Evening News* reporter during Ferguson's time. I've read quite a lot about the relationship he had with Ferguson, and I'd rather be not privy to all that from the manager off the record. I'd rather go about trying to find out stuff myself.

TB: That's interesting because that's the second time now you've mentioned this idea of, "Don't tell me stuff off the record because I feel uncomfortable with that". "Hamstrung" is a phrase you used earlier and you'd rather uncover that stuff yourself....

Int3: Yeah...

TB: ... from another source. Umm, how do you navigate in your daily practice then this idea of being on the record, off the record? Do you actually say to people, "I don't do off the record, whatever you tell me is on the record."

Int3: I'm very, very reluctant to take information off the record but I do do it because it's almost like a game of give and take, but I don't like doing it because it puts you in a difficult position; it's likely to put you in a difficult position further down the line. An example of that is, ██████ told me last summer that he was definitely standing down at the end of this season – off the record. So, all season there's been speculation about his future and I've known that he's going but I haven't been able to say it. So if he drops some hints somewhere at a fans' forum or in some programme notes I've been able to do a story on that saying "██████ dropping a hint here" but I've been hamstrung I'd say for a year because, sort of, it was a year-long agreement that he would tell me first when the time was right. Umm, so that was an example of me accepting information off the record, because I think I would say that was due to the strong relationship I've had with him over a long period of time I didn't think I really had any other choice. I knew I was going to get the story out of it at the end. But I don't like doing it and I often say "No, if you tell me something that is on the record".

TB: Do you think your behaviour there is a form of self-censorship or is it just a pragmatic, kind of, treatment – a pragmatic relationship with a source?

Int3: Pragmatic I think, because a lot of journalists have a relationship with a club where it's cosy but it's one-way. So they don't get anything out of it. So, a lot my behaviour is dictated by justifying my job. So justifying being there – why are you in that job if you're not going to write stories and tell people stuff they don't want to know? And there's always the public interest argument, because without supporters paying money to watch the games there would be no club, nobody getting paid. So I always think is it in the fans' interests to know what's going on? If yes, which it normally is, do the story. I... but with certain situations, like the ██████ situation, you have to use your judgment and experience and weigh things up – is it going to be to your benefit long-term, the relationship's benefit long-term? Erm, but if there was a situation where I didn't feel it was fair or it needed to come out sooner, then I would... many, many times I've refused to accept the information off the record.

TB: Ok, so to what extent then do you think self-censorship does occur within sports journalism?



Int3: It does. It's a constant balancing act between justifying being there in that position, in that, erm, privileged position, you have to... it's a constant balancing act I think. Because even if you refuse to accept information off the record you're still going to be privy to stuff that may or may not need to be reported, so I think you're almost constantly semi-self-editing stuff or weighing up whether you need to do something.

TB: And what do you mean by "need" there?

Int3: If you, if you don't cut through and tell people stuff they don't know there's no point you being in the job.

TB: I see, I see, and what about, um, censoring – self-censoring – opinions that you've got? I mean, we might talk about self-censoring a fact, a fact that you're aware of pertaining to a club or individual and for whatever reason you don't publish, but what about an opinion – these days, columns, opinion pieces are obviously still part and parcel of what a sports journalist does. Does that occur with you? Do you ever sort of sit on opinions?

Int3: With fans' views I'm very reluctant to alter somebody's opinion even if it's a very strong one as long as it's not personal, as long as it's not defamatory. I think if a fan submits a view to me then I will publish it, as close as I can to the original. And quite often we've had a situation where we've had somebody who's had a strong say on something, we've tried to find somebody with the other opinion to try and balance it to give it some balance. But with my own opinion I think you have to be careful with your choice of words sometimes. Umm, because there are certain things that you need to avoid if you're going to be able to speak to somebody ever again – but still get the point across, if you see what I mean? It's probably a choice of language and not ever letting anything get personal. So it's always trying to find the right words to make your opinion clear without severing ties, although you know at times there's going to be friction.

TB: So it's a case of expressing yourself judiciously, in a way?

Int3: Yeah. But I think people want to read that as well, I don't think people want to read in my line of work, in my type of newspaper at the moment, the sort of sensationalist language that you might get in a tabloid. When I did the talk with the students I said that I think my newspaper is somewhere between the BBC and *The Sun*. It's not, it will speculate on things a bit more than the BBC but it won't just in terms of the headlines, the language, the types of stories, I think my newspaper, my website, is somewhere between the two. That middle ground.

TB: Yeah. To what extent do sports clubs – press officers – have an influence over what you do or don't do, in your own experience?

Int3: A big influence, big influence.

TB: Positive or negative?

Int3: Umm, both, both. Erm, I've been on both sides of the fence so I know what – I think I've got a good understanding of what the media officer's job is and it helps if they've got an idea what the journalist's is. I've worked with quite a few different press officers at quite a few different clubs and the best one is one that's probably worked on the other side of the fence as well. So, I think the relationship will be sibling-like. So, get on well a lot of the time but there's bound to be the odd fall out, the odd tension, but never personal. So both parties understand the other has a job to do and I'd say a high percentage of the time I've got on very well and worked very well and worked very harmoniously but there will be times like sibling fall-outs – inevitable, I think. And I think when, I mean, it's really interesting when I started covering [REDACTED] in 2005 there was no press officer. There was nobody. I could turn up at the training ground, I could ring anybody up whenever I wanted, I was in the changing room, I was in watching training, you know, it was just open house. And that was 2005. I think they appointed the first press officer part-time probably in about '07 or '08 and that was difficult for me to take because suddenly I had somebody putting a bit of a barrier up. And then there was a bit of "Why are you stopping me? Why can I only speak to a certain number of players at a certain amount of time?" and things like that, which obviously would have happened to me a lot earlier if I was covering a Premier League club, but it was a bit of a shock to the system at the time. And I think it dawned on me fairly quickly that I needed to advance my coverage accordingly to offer something different. That was the time I really started moving away from what the club was starting to put out because the press officer's job is obviously, at a club [REDACTED], is to produce content as well as work and liaise with the media over their output. So that was a major change.

TB: Yeah. Umm, this question now actually harks back to something you said right at the start when you were maybe contrasting some of the work that you do on a daily basis with maybe some of the conversations you overhear on the news desk. You might be familiar with sports journalism in the past sometimes being referred to as the "toy department" of the news room, with sports reporters often fulfilling a "cheerleader" role rather than a watchdog role. Do you think that characterisation is justified in your experience working in sports journalism?

Int3: Err, I'd still say that it's more fun but it does mean a hell of a lot to people, you know, it's an incredibly important part of people's lives. Football, rugby, other sports, you know it's a massive part. But for most people it's a hobby, umm, and it is a massive difference between what I'm doing and what news reporters are doing. I think they are exposing things that almost like, there's been a couple of examples throughout my career that they're doing on a daily basis, where people's liberty is on the line, you know. It is different. Umm, I don't... What phrase did you use sorry, the "toy department"?

TB: The toy department...

Int3: ...Yeah...

TB: ... Was one of them and then the cheerleader role.

Int3: Yeah. Well I think the amount of space given to football in particular and rugby by the national papers and the TV and things like that show how valuable and how much interest there is, and how much demand there is for it. Umm, and it's just part of culture, isn't it? So I think it's massively important. Important, but not very often a matter of life or death.

TB: No. But also at the start today you did mention about the importance of accountability and not being afraid to back off from maybe tricky stories. So that tradition of the watchdog function, you know, that journalists are supposed to adopt towards the powerful in maybe business and politics, I mean, do you think there is that role for the, for the **watchdog component of the sports journalist?**

Int3: Yeah. **I think Premier League reporters have almost given up on that now, because they've been so pushed away from it. They are so restricted, it's so controlled, it's, umm... I think the higher up you go – obviously the vast majority of my experience is in football – the higher up you go the footballing pyramid the harder it is to get underneath the skin of it now.** And I think those guys, the guys like the Manchester United reporter under Fergie, those are rare now. I think they've almost taken a step back and they are doing – there are some good examples of it – they're doing “Which of these glove-men starts as Neil Warnock's number one?” and “Which of these players might this team want to sign?” and things like that. They've almost backed off and are offering completely different fan-led content. I think lower down the footballing pyramid you can still do both. You can still be holding the club to account, you can still get underneath the skin of it, you can still, umm, get wind of stuff pretty quickly with contacts. Umm, but I think the average age of journalists covering Premier League clubs will have dropped considerably and it's really hard to have that time to build up those really strong contacts over a long period of time which you need, which I had. I don't think that many journalists will have that now. So I think it's harder to pierce the surface, especially covering, I mean I've never covered a Premier League club on a regular basis but I just think it must be a completely different challenge to covering a League Two club.

TB: So you mentioned the Premier League there. I mean is Premier League sports coverage effectively a [interruption at door of room]... Is Premier League football coverage almost a charade to that extent in that, you know, the journalists themselves know they're not really getting to the truth, the people giving them the quotes maybe from the press conference have been media-trained and maybe know, they've been briefed beforehand. I mean, what are your thoughts on that? As you say, lower down the pyramid maybe there is that scope still to have a better chance at having, getting a grip on, on the truth of the matter.

Int3: I think **the main purpose of media Premier league coverage is for them not to say anything.** You know, if you listen to interviews on *Match of the Day* it's just utter hot air – cliché, hot air, and predictable. You know, it's all, I'm sure they only really put it on so you can see the Premier League player talking to the camera. If you actually listen to what they're saying it very rarely offers anything. Managers are slightly, I think managers have been there, done it, they can be a bit cleverer and they can be a bit more humorous and get stuff across, but Premier League players are normally just utter robots now. Umm, so that's why I think... and **I think there's a lot, 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.** And that's a massive part

of the role that the media's got to play to try, to try and do that. And I think the national papers try to do that. But when you're covering a club as a local reporter at the Premier League I just think they'll probably just swat you to one side now, because you're not that important to them anymore.

TB: Isn't there something to be said however for, if you're reporting from afar and you're not doing that sort of merry-go-round of press conference and match, of press conference and match, if you're a little bit further removed, you are able to kind of almost dig around, dig for those bigger stories without a sense of compunction because you're not as it were on reasonably friendly terms with the manager, you don't feel like you're, umm, stabbing anyone in the back because you're that stepped removed? Is there not actually something for that, can we not actually be entering a new golden age of reporting because maybe people are one or two steps removed from being at the club itself, being within the club?

Int3: I still think in an ideal world you'd still be both, you'd be able to do both, or a bit of both. But I think that's so hard now in Premier League. Umm, but my, I think, something's going to have to change in the future with the Premier League because it's becoming too far removed from the rest of football. It's a different topic. I just think, I just think it's going to, it can't carry on like this because it's just going to eat itself, but that's probably reflected in the media coverage, you know. There are certain obligations they have to fulfil with Sky, BT, and I don't think they've got any interest in what a local paper's writing, umm, about them. They're just not important. You know Premier League footballers are rich because of Sky Sports. Sky Sports have got all the power, all the access, all the contacts now and turned deadline day into a massive event themselves haven't they really, Sky? But it is, I just imagine it's soul-destroying trying to cover a Premier League club for a local paper if you're a new journalist and you're not already established. I think that must be very hard, but that's why the type of coverage is changing at that level. If you look at the sort of coverage that Football London are putting out – a new website started by my company – it's all, it can all be done by young up-and-coming talented journalists sat in an office. They don't ever need to go to a press conference or a match – creative content.

TB: Yeah. Just continuing that point about press conferences, do you think too much time can be spent sort of covering on-diary stuff as a sports reporter at the expense of getting kind of stronger stuff off-diary? Erm, you know, maybe attending press conferences some might say isn't... if you end up missing a few press conferences maybe it's not the end of the world in as much as you might be channelling your efforts elsewhere to dig out stories. Do you think that on-diary/off-diary thing is an important distinction?

Int3: Yeah. It is, yeah, and papers in my company that cover big clubs often don't bother now. Some of them don't even go to the games, you know. In my job I still feel like I need to go to the press conference and the games, I still think it's valuable to go, still get a decent result from it in terms of readership, but I think Premier League clubs it's all being put out live by the clubs. You're probably better off just staying in the office and watching it live, analysing it or getting a fan opinion on it. You'll probably get to ask one question of your own, if that, because there are so many people there at Premier League press conferences that are going to be trying to ask questions it's... Yeah I do think there are papers that have

stopped going to games, which I think is quite sad. But it's all based on what you're going to get out of it.

TB: Interesting. So that really takes me into the last few questions which are more focused on the professional self-identity of sports journalists. You mentioned there about how, these days, particularly with online viewing figures online, maybe attending matches which used to be bread and butter – the given really for a sports journalist's activity – maybe that's becoming less important in some instances and I wonder whether you can describe, based on your own experience and in your own words, the feeling that you've had about the increasing shift to digital output, how that's changed, umm, kind of your sense of what it is to be a sports journalist?

Int3: I think "fan-led" is a term that's used a lot in – the higher you go up it's more fan-led content. 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; things about FIFA; things about, you know, that national newspapers have now got world wrestling entertainment correspondents because young people love watching it, so they've actually got... a guy that I used to work with on football is now covering WWE for Sky. That's his job. That's just incredible really when you think about it; they're actually employing people to cover a sport – it's not really a sport, it's sport entertainment. But they're probably investing a lot more time, money and effort into that than they are things like golf and tennis and sports like that because it's, there's the demand for it. Umm, but I, yeah, umm, it's more of a just the main impact has been the interactive side of it, I think, for me. So 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're almost, you can create a lot of content just on fan opinion and what fans are talking about; what's the burning issue, what's the... It's almost like the trending topics about the club you're covering and what you need to go and do more, tailor your content towards that.

TB: If you're being led by the fans, as it were, to that extent though, to what extent are you still a journalist or to what extent are you kind of just one of the fans who's trying to feed more content to the fans, as it were?

Int3: I think you're the voice of reason and the forum for fan debate and, and interspersed with that is still really good exclusive stories, a variety of content – fan and the more traditional stories that I still think are massively important, which some people higher up the footballing chain wouldn't value at all anymore but I still feel like I've got a bit of the best of both worlds at the moment but it's harder and harder because, just look at the Man City – I think the Man City media team has probably got more people working for it than the whole of my news room. That just shows the challenges that newspapers – the *Manchester Evening News* – has got. So they will, the vast majority of their content will be opinion, analysis and fan view rather than hard news, for that reason – because everything is so carefully controlled. I still feel like I'm trying to move towards the interactive stuff and I have been for a long time but still hang onto the best of the stuff that used to make up the majority of the coverage. I think there's still an important part of that in the coverage here but if I went to cover, if I went to cover, err, a Premier League club I think it would... I just

wouldn't have the time to establish myself as a journalist in that area that knows everybody, has all the contacts, by the time I'd done that I'd have been made redundant probably. 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 engage with people. So you're the sort of hub of all that, all that chat and all that debate and all those issues – they'll come to you to find out what you make of it and what you're...

TB: ... So you're stimulating the debate and presiding over it?

Int3: Yeah.

TB: To a large extent.

Int3: Definitely, yeah, definitely. I think it can't just be a one-way thing now. Newspapers, it would be purely based on what they 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, you know, there's no hiding place for content that isn't performing.

TB: Because you can use real-time monitoring software?

Int3: Yeah. It's there every day in our newsroom on the screen. Every day the long tail of content is analysed – why are you spending time doing stories that are only being read by a couple of hundred people? You can't do that anymore. You need to do more of that, less of that, spend more time on that. And fan-led content does perform well but I think it's, you still need to be a trusted source even if it's fan-led.

TB: Umm, so you've touched on there the – more than touched on, you've explicated the slightly different role you maybe have now to not that long ago – but on a day-to-day basis what tasks jump out at you as being very different to what you were maybe doing a decade ago?

Int3: I think a good local reporter of a club is sort of seen as a voice of the supporters, I think they always were even when it was just a newspaper. What supporters want to read has changed massively. So now people, people want to, people jump on any type of transfer speculation story, even more so than before. I think people, people enjoy reading "Ten potential replacements for an outgoing goalkeeper" knowing that only one of them, if that, could possibly be signing. People seem to enjoy that sort of content. People don't want to read massive chunks of text that aren't broken up and presented cleverly, that's why the Five Things analysis pieces have been such a success for us because they are easy to read on mobile, they're not just huge screens of text that don't really work on mobile. So, that's definitely been a massive consideration for me in recent years – how much, what percentage, of people are going to be reading my stuff on mobile and what won't work on a mobile screen, that might have worked on a... ? You almost, umm, have in mind young people scrolling through their phones, what are they going to want to read, which is very different to what you think maybe the people still buying the paper are going to want to read. Umm, so I think it's, there's a lot more awareness of what performs well and we've been ruthless I think with digital, a lot of stuff that we now know we were only hanging onto

for nostalgic reasons has just gone now – partly due to, you know, staffing levels, partly due to it just wasn't justifying the time being spent on it anyway.

TB: Can you give examples of the sort of demise of nostalgia?

Int3: Yeah, to sum up, to sum it up, [REDACTED] have moved away from local grassroots sports coverage. Now they are even moving away from local grassroots football coverage. It's all become very condensed to football, rugby, in certain places, if you've got a Premiership rugby club then there's a chance of getting some decent results from rugby but otherwise no. Football and the pressure to focus on the main football club in the area, umm, and this is just the [REDACTED] way. This isn't necessarily how [REDACTED] are doing it or other publishers. [REDACTED] are not interested anymore in grassroots sport. So, umm, young youth sport, women's sport, it's a constant battle to actually be able to spend any time on any of that now because it doesn't deliver results online, even though there might still be an audience for it in print. The print product isn't a priority anymore.

TB: You mentioned women's sport there. Umm, could you elaborate a bit on that because on the face of it women's sport has never had a higher profile?

Int3: When, well, I sort of, my personal experience... When I took over as sports editor I had an idealistic view of do more, give minority sports more coverage, give women's sport more coverage, try and promote women's football in particular but other women's sport, try and do more on young sport, try and do more on features about what this sports all about that people might not know and might enjoy reading. As the last three years have gone by that's become harder because the size of the team has reduced from eight to two and the analytics have said there's just not enough interest in it to justify carrying on doing it. So I, we had a women's sports page in the paper every week, we were doing a lot more on any women's sport that we could, actively trying to promote it. Now, now we just don't have the resources to do it and we, we, all we can really do is give [REDACTED] Ladies a bit of coverage. But it's not the vision I had when I started as sports editor; I wouldn't have expected this to have happened over the last three years when I first started as sports editor. But luckily...

TB: How does it make you feel? Those ideals...

Int3: Umm, I've spent a lot of time debating it and discussing it, but in a way I'm lucky because what I specialise in has taken over. So that's helped in a way. Even horse racing [REDACTED] has no interest online, because just the habit of the people who follow that sport – they're not really, there's not enough of them what want to read the intricacies of the sport. They just want to have a drink and a bet and it's a different type of demand, and if they are going to want to read about the sport they're probably going to go to the *Racing Post*, so even, even the paper nearest to [REDACTED] can't get – even though they had a full-time racing reporter who was excellent – the audience just wasn't there. So I would feel a lot worse if I was a racing reporter. But I, I feel very torn as I feel like we're letting down the local sport community, umm, and I've had a lot of discussions about this – still ongoing now...

TB: This might be the grassroots community? This might be...

Int3: ...Yeah...

TB: ... Women's sport, horse racing, all these groups?

Int3: Yeah. Everything that's now being overlooked because the pressure's on – and this does come down to pressure of daily, digital page view targets. Erm, this is literally ongoing day to day now, is it better to have a million page views or is it better to have a thousand page views every day from [REDACTED] – people from [REDACTED] reading it every day? Or is it better to have huge page views coming in from all over the world, you know, you could set up a website in England, have multiple millions of page views per day, but if they're coming from other parts of the world is that going to help you make money out of it? So that is an ongoing conundrum for people that are far higher up the chain than I am to decide. But I've been to focus on, again, page views – what performs well in this area is [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. And that's reflected in the coverage that we do but I still find myself fighting for local sport, umm, but there just isn't, it's pretty clear now there just isn't enough interest in it to make money out of it digitally. Not in the way that they're trying to, anyway. So it is, it is one of those situations where nobody really knows what's going to happen next.

TB: Umm, so your own sense of professional identity amid all these changes and things, do you still when you think of yourself as being a sports journalist, a sport editor, umm, do you see yourself as someone who works in a profession, or in a trade, a craft? Do you have a particular perspective on how you, on how you sit as it were in occupations and what's your relationship – this is an associated question, I suppose – with your audience, how do you perceive that?

Int3: I think, err, I still see myself as a sports journalist even though a massive percentage of my content is football, I'm still responsible for managing another sports writer who the vast majority of his content is rugby. And I'm still responsible for organising freelance reporters, umm, photographers, and I think I'm lucky because ever since I've been a sports journalist I've been building a [REDACTED] following and that's the one thing that I'm still expected to do most of the time. But I, we do have to say "no" to people a lot now who want to try and get coverage for certain things; there just isn't enough interest to do it. Umm, but I see it, not a trade, I do I see it as a profession I'd say. That's probably the word I'd use. Sports journalism: profession.

TB: And that's because you've got... why is that, why is it that you think it's a profession?

Int3: Difficult, a difficult one to answer really, I...

TB: I mean in the context of my study looking at ethics I wonder whether an ethical code of practice is often what a certain profession will have – the GMC for doctors and, you know, obviously lawyers can get struck off as well – I mean that sort of association of ethical standards is often ingrained in the sense of something being a profession. I wonder whether



you think that there are certain kind of ways you approach your work, maybe values that you approach your work with, that maybe inform that sense of what it is to be a profession?

Int3: I think you have to go through a lot of stages to get to this position. Umm, qualifications, experience, more qualifications – NCTJ qualifications, degrees, various experience. And then most sports journalists start off in news, I'd say, before moving into sport. And I think it's so easy to, I think it's so easy to panic into doing something that isn't going to be sustainable long term. So I think the, you have to maintain certain standards to have longevity otherwise I think you can get spit, swallowed, just chewed up and spat out pretty quickly with it being so ruthless and cut-throat at the moment. I do think you're almost fighting now, which I don't think you used to have to do as much in the days of daily print, **you're fighting to be relevant and to actually justify being there now**. And I think that's a completely different challenge because if you aren't willing to fight for your position I think you can fade pretty quickly. And I think having high professional standards is a massive part of that.

TB: Ok. Umm, just a couple of questions now. The penultimate one is, umm, in your experience how firm do you think the distinction is today between sports journalism and sports PR?

Int3: I, I believe they should be completely different and, as we spoke earlier, the relationship, the relationship between a media PR employee of a sports club and a journalist, we have got completely different challenges, although there is an overlap. The job descriptions are completely different. And I think if, if, and I'll give you an example, I think the coverage of ██████████ in the ██████████ newspaper is PR, and I would be embarrassed to produce that type of coverage for ██████████. Umm, so I think there's an overlap there that there shouldn't be, and I feel really strongly that I've got to not be PR, positive PR, for the club. Completely different. I've got to hold the club to account, I've got to ask difficult questions, I've got to write stories that they don't want printed, but it's not in a malicious way. You're not going after somebody, umm, you are there to offer something different to the club and get the truth. So I think it's easy to fall into that trap of becoming a, sort of, becoming a cheerleader, but I really, really feel strongly that that's not what I should be doing in my job.

TB: Thank you. So, umm, so finally quite a general question like the first question really, what do you think are the essential characteristics that define a sports journalists in today's media environment? That's the essential characteristics.

Int3: Sorry, could you just say that again Tom?

TB: Yeah. What do you think are the essential characteristics that define a sports journalists in today's media environment?

Int3: Ok.

TB: So, given the digital and social media kind of environment that we've discussed.

Int3: I think all-rounder, because I don't think you can just be good at one thing anymore, I think you have to be able to turn your hand to a lot of different things, so being adaptable and moving with the times, which are moving at a pretty scary pace, I think are massively important. So being adaptable and flexible and an all-rounder. I think being discreet with protecting sources is massively important for me. I get asked multiple times per day "Who told you that?" and you have to have the strength of character to be able to protect sources who will pretty quickly not be sources if you tell everyone where information's coming from. So I think you have to work with a level of discretion but be trustworthy and objective when you need to be, but strongly opinions when you need to be as well. Umm, balanced and fair, and not a cheerleader, not controlled by pressure from one person trying to get you to write in a certain way from outside the company. Umm, represent the company you're working for with pride and always be conscious of not letting yourself or the company down because every time you write something or appear somewhere or tweet something or, you know, you're going to be associated with the company you're working for. You've constantly got to bear that in mind, but I think having a presence as a personality is massively important. So I think more so than news journalists, umm. The source of traffic for news is completely different for sport. I think sports fans like to know who they're reading and have that sort of history and past and trust for somebody whereas I think news reporters it's, it's more... I don't think people have that sort of following as you do, you have a niche in sport. I think you've sort of got a duty to those followers.

TB: It's almost like a sense of affinity that the readers might start to have with you as a reporter, is that fair?...

Int3: ... Yeah...

TB: And do you think social media – the digital environment – has enhanced that? That sense of rapport almost?

Int3: Yeah, massively. When [REDACTED] who covered [REDACTED] for 43 years, he spent a lot of time of his career, nobody even knew his name. He was just in the paper, he had a pen name in the paper of "[REDACTED]". Everyone knew who [REDACTED] was but nobody knew his name was [REDACTED], they didn't know what he looked like. They'd never met him. He just wrote for the paper and it was a massive divide. Now I feel like I'm in the middle of the fans. So, if fans want something done, I'm in the privileged position that I can maybe help it happen or find out why it's not happening, or, you know, I think that's a massive part of it is representing the fans.

TB: Yeah, so – I know I said it was the last question but I'm going on a bit now – was that a knock on the door?

Int3: I don't think so.

TB: Yeah, so it's almost like sometimes you're doing the same traditional role as a sports journalist but to use your phrase there you're in amongst the fans now doing that so it's like you still regard yourself as having to fulfil those traditional journalism roles but you now just have to bear in mind that you're, umm, not with the masses that's a bit of a patronizing way

of putting it, but you're among their number as it were in a way that maybe you weren't five or ten years ago?

Int3: Yeah, I'd agree with that, and I think it's just, you need to have all the skills that you had as a journalist in the 90s I think, you need to have all those skills but you need to be able to adapt them and tailor them into so many different things now. But I still don't think you can do the job well if you haven't got those basic skills. But they're not enough on their own anymore, I don't think. So I think it's almost like a pyramid – you have to all the basics before you can move up to the next level, and then as you go up you still need to be able to... something new will come up that you'll have to master as a journalist and everyone will start using it and if you get left behind by the time you've caught up and learned how to use it everyone will be using something else. And I find, I think that's changed a lot. It's more of a fight to remain relevant now than it used to be. It wasn't under threat before. There was always pressure. There was always sales targets for papers, there was always deadlines, there was always pressure to get a good story. But now I think it's, it's so out there for everyone to see. You know there's a lot of pressure, a lot of journalists struggle with it because you know how many people have read your stories every day. That wasn't the case when it was just general newspaper sales figures. Nobody knew exactly why people were buying the paper. There's so much pressure now but I, you know, it is fighting to, to sort of have an important role to play in the relationship between the fans and the club. And the club's media presence has definitely had an impact on that. They haven't replaced what a newspaper journalist used to do but they've taken on a lot of the type of content that would have done well for a journalist just doesn't cut it anymore because of that, that extra layer. We used to provide the content, they used to play the football or rugby. Now they're doing both now, but they're doing it in a different way to the way we should. But it has changed beyond all recognition in the last 15 years, I think.

TB: And you speak about it there in an existential way. You've got, it's a fight to retain the roles that... almost because you're under more scrutiny, more tailored individual scrutiny, the figures...

Int3: It's just the fact that people can get their information from so many different places now. And that's why I think you have to be trusted and respected otherwise people will go elsewhere. There's a massive amount of competition now whereas it used to be just a club, a media outlet. It's just a crowded market now and I think you used the phrase "citizen journalist" earlier didn't you, umm, did you use the phrase "citizen journalism" or...

TB: ... I remember having a chat...

Int3: ... Yeah, so there's a [REDACTED] fan, erm, who videos a lot of games on his phone, videos the goals, takes arty pictures, and he's got a good social media following. He shouldn't be doing it really because you're not supposed to take videos or pictures of the games but he's built a good following, erm. You've got students producing blogs that are well-written, you've got, ermm, people can read content about your club in opposition papers now which they wouldn't have done in the past, you know. [REDACTED] played [REDACTED] recently, if the [REDACTED] reporter wrote something really interesting about [REDACTED] it's there online for all to see whereas before it would have just been in

. There's all these things sort of overlapping with what you're trying to do, so you have to try and carve out a nice for yourself otherwise you get, you'll just get trampled on. And you've got to be strong with that, but I think the professional standards and the ethics are a massive part of that, because if you get it wrong.... I think there's one other thing worth mentioning of how badly it can go very wrong very quickly is that a colleague of mine, a couple of years ago he did a hit-or-miss January signings feature on footballers and he gave "miss" to a footballer who had just recovered from cancer. And this was just supposed to be a bit of fun but he got so much abuse for it online that it almost finished him off in terms of reputation and, he, it was just one bad decision and he could have just done it on Twitter, this was actually an article, but you are one... I think you are under scrutiny all the time.

TB: And a lot of the flak he got there, did that come online?

Int3: Yeah.

TB: And what nature was it and how did it affect him?

Int3: It was, you know, personal insults and, umm, I think, I think Twitter – if you're going to be a footballer who's on Twitter or you're going to be a journalist on Twitter and you're going to read it you need to be prepared to read good and bad and not take it personally because you will get people, if they're not happy about a result or performance, they'll vent at anything. So obviously the less abuse you get the better but you've got to accept that you're going to get some at some point. Before you were untouchable, you were just working for a newspaper and nobody really could – I suppose they could write you a letter but often they wouldn't even have known your name. You're sort of right out there now to be shot at if you, if you make a bad judgment call. So I think that self-editing that you've spoken about is so important because nobody's babysitting you through it, you're out there and how you conduct yourself isn't as controlled as it used to be because you haven't got people subbing stuff before it goes on Twitter or before it goes on a breaking news story online. That's, that's why young news reporters aren't allowed to self-publish yet. They have to earn that. But I, on sport, we both publish straight to web. If you'd told somebody in the 80s that that would be happening I don't think they would have believed you, would they? So, it's, but the knowledge of the legal system is so important now because there isn't as many safety nets.

TB: I see. So that legal knowledge is more important than ever.

Int3: I think it's like spelling. Nobody knows how to spell every word but you need to know the ones you need to check and I think it's like that with the law. Nobody knows everything but you just need to know the ones that you need to check, double check, just to make sure. You have to see the warning signs to avoid making a major mistake.

TB: And very, very finally – typical journalist asking more questions than I said I would – but you mentioned there about abuse online. In your experience are you aware of any other people who may have been trolled, you know, receiving, kind of, constant attentions – unwanted attentions – online?

Int3: I think every sports journalist if they're in the thick of it like I said earlier, if they're in the middle of it and they're stimulating debate and they're giving people a voice and they're reflecting the fans' views, they're holding clubs to account and their writing opinion pieces, it's inevitable that you're going to get some stick.

TB: But stick in the sense of more sustained individual...

Int3: ... Yeah, I think that's the worst example of the journalist who, who just made one bad call in an article and got a lot of stick for it, umm. I would say the longer you, the longer established you are the more you might be able to get away with, but if you're trying to sort of find your way and you make a real bad mistake I think you can get dog's abuse. I can't think of any examples of journalists that have been sort of properly hounded out but, really, if you look at comments on our news Facebook page, you know, a lot of it is "What on earth is this story?" or, you know, if you criticise anybody you get people saying "You can't say that about my relation" and then the response will be, well, it was said in court, so we can. And people, people think they can almost control what you're doing because they can contact you through social media and things like that. So there is a, and I just think that's part of doing the job. You're going to write stuff, particularly on news but also on sport, that people don't want you to write, you're going to get some backlash. But I can't think of any other examples that people have been really, really badly affected by it, but you have to be willing to accept a bit of stick and that's fine, that's fine. I think it's like being a football manager, you know that, you know that if you're going to read it you're going to see good and bad. So I would advise managers not to read any of it, but if you read it you'll see the good and the bad, and negative people tend to shout a bit louder online behind the keyboard don't they, so...

TB: Great, thanks ■■■.

Int3: Is that alright, Tom?

TB: Yeah, I really appreciate that.

### **Gamma – Initial Distillation:**

- A slight tension emerges between the perception of sports journalism content as being "fun" and the watchdog role: "you're there to hold them to account, get to the bottom of stuff, find out what's really going on, make sure the fans are in the picture" (p1). Participant sees his first duty as towards the fans. "I think the biggest, the person that I feel like I'm representing is, is the supporters... So you're there almost now to be the fan that wants to find out what's really going on, address issues at the club... I think I've a responsibility to fans to uncover the issues that they feel are important" (p3). Later, again: "So I always think is it in the fans' interests to know what's going on? If yes, which it normally is, do the story" (p14).
- The participant thinks deeply and carefully about how to use delicate information given to him by sources, but states too that worrying too much about people's reactions is likely to limit a sports journalist's success. "But it is a constant balancing act between using your contacts, protecting your contacts, never revealing your sources – which is what my policy is

– and getting the job done. You know, there is a lot of pressure to get people to read your stuff. I think if you spend too much time tiptoeing around trying not to upset anybody then I don't think you'll be that successful" (p1). Balancing what information to use/what not to use from sources equates to a constant state of "self-editing": "I think you're almost constantly semi-self-editing stuff or weighing up whether you need to do something" (p15).

- Social media makes balance and objectivity more important for the sports journalist, not less. "I don't think you can be more cavalier now than it was when it was just print. I think you still have to be very careful, erm, possibly more so, because... you still have to be seen as the reliable source, umm, not somebody who's going to be carried away by their emotions when they're reporting on something, not somebody who's going to act like a fan" (p2).
- The participant is sensitive to accusations of clickbait in his own practice, but believes the practice is widespread by other sports journalists. "Whether they're directing it at me or other journalists I'm quite sensitive about the word "clickbait" because I think not giving it all away in a headline is just common sense as a journalist, it doesn't mean it's clickbait, it means it's trying to get people to read your stories, as you would in the print product when there's a headline that grabs your attention... there are a lot of examples that I can think of where newspapers are panicking, desperate for people to read stuff, and they basically are trying to almost trick people in. That's not what I think is the way forward" (p3)
- As clubs produce more in-house content, the participant sees himself as having new competition. "I think the competition's changed from being rival newspapers to being media against club media, offering something different" (p4).
- Participant makes it explicit that social media has altered the nature of his job, but that it brings dangers. "I think it's had the biggest impact of anything since I've started as a sports journalist – social media... Twitter is probably dangerous, it can be dangerous I think, if you, if you start tweeting in a certain mood or at a certain time of day, or if you've had a few drinks, it's always there on your phone, it's always a risk to be tweeting if you're not in a clear frame of mind" (p9-10). In particular, the pace at which Twitter operates poses the risk of things being done with dangerous haste. "I think if you're using your own Twitter account as a first port of call for a lot of your readers I think you need to be more careful. You could easily put something that you regret on there in a split second, whereas I think you're very unlikely to do that in a story, certainly a newspaper story or even an online story, you have more time to think about it and draw breath whereas with Twitter everything's so instant that somebody can say something to you and you can just snap. I think that's an ethical issue because it's so instant and suddenly thousands of people are going to see it. Even if you delete it pretty much straight away it's out there, it's going to be screenshotted" (p10).
- Tying in with the reflective tone that is characteristic of the interview, the participant adopts a cautious, "self-editing" approach to Twitter to ensure his professional credibility is protected and developed. "I think I've always managed to I think sort of self-edit my Twitter and I think for that reason I think I've got a good Twitter following that will believe what I say, because I can't think of any examples where I've had to backtrack or delete or get involved in any silly spats" (p10). This self-editing on Twitter is viewed as the digital equivalent of not behaving like an emotional fan in the press box. "I think it's sort of comparable to if you're a fan of a team and you're reporting a game, you don't stand up in the press box and start shouting and screaming when a goal goes in. I think it's a bit like that. With Twitter you can't act like an emotional fan. You've got to be passionate about it and you've got to reflect the fans' views but I don't think you can behave like a fan. You can't, err, you have to have some restraint there. There's a line as a journalist between... you know, and I think it's similar to journalists celebrating in press boxes, which I'm very anti. And it's a bit like that on Twitter as well" (p11).
- Social media has made the personality of the sports journalist more important, and it is vital for longevity and employability that one builds one reputation for reliability and accuracy. "I

think it's a lot more about the personality of the journalist now than it used to be in the days of print. I think Henry Winter is a good example, because I think – we might have discussed it before – Henry Winter was a major personality at *The Telegraph*, built up a massive online following, and then he moved to *The Times*, and all that really changed was the fact he was working for *The Times* now. His writing style didn't change, his Twitter didn't change, they just, he just moved his followers over from one website to another. So he wouldn't have built that following at the *Telegraph* if he hadn't have been a long-standing, reliable, respected journalist. So I think you need to build up your reputation over a period of time, umm, build up a loyal readership, build up a loyal social media following, but you also have to represent the company you're working for and the company that's paying your salary and make sure their reputation isn't damaged" (p5). Again, later on, the participant returns to the importance of personality. "I think sports fans like to know who they're reading and have that sort of history and past and trust for somebody... you have a niche in sport. I think you've sort of got a duty to those followers" (p24).

- Participant sees media law as setting the limits of his journalistic practice, not codes. While stating that it's "worth" having the guidelines contained in the Editors' Code of Practice, they would appear redundant in his approach. "I think it almost boils down to the law now. Media law, umm, rather than less formal guidelines, I think that's... It's almost, you can push it as far as you want as long as you're not breaking the law, as long as there's no legal issue... I think it's, it's worth having as guidelines but I think there will be times when you really have to push the boundaries of them" (p7).
- Sense of perpetual time pressure in the digital age emerges, with quality of writing suffering. "I'd say there's a lot more shorter, sharper, snappy stories going online on a more regular basis, and it's quite hard to justify spending masses of times on a piece... I think it's almost better to get something out quickly that's a bit rough around the edges than it is to second with something that's more polished. But if you've got the skills hopefully you can do both and produce something that's both polished and first out. Erm, but speed, speed, probably less words but more stories. And it's sort of 24/7 now. Somebody will be ready to spring into life and put a story on our website at any point of the day or night" (p9).
- While having heard of illegal activities in football that have gone unreported, the participant was not aware of sports journalists perpetrating any illegal acts.
- The participant stresses the careful selection of words in opinion pieces as being essential to preserving relationships. "But with my own opinion I think you have to be careful with your choice of words sometimes... because there are certain things that you need to avoid if you're going to be able to speak to somebody ever again – but still get the point across, if you see what I mean? It's probably a choice of language and not ever letting anything get personal. So it's always trying to find the right words to make your opinion clear without severing ties, although you know at times there's going to be friction" (p15).
- The carefully-guarded access to Premier League football clubs means that the truth is hard to get to, with many top-flight football reporters effectively not trying to fulfil a watchdog function because they are at such distance from clubs. "I think Premier League reporters have almost given up on that now, because they've been so pushed away from it. They are so restricted, it's so controlled, it's, umm... I think the higher up you go – obviously the vast majority of my experience is in football – 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, 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" (p17). This reflects the idea of content being sanitized and remote from the truth.
- Sedentary/screen-based reporting is a fact of the digital age, with the participant questioning why Premier League reporters would go to a press conference where their access and number of questions is so restricted. "If you look at the sort of coverage that Football London are putting out – a new website started by my company – it's all, it can all

be done by young up-and-coming talented journalists sat in an office. They don't ever need to go to a press conference or a match – creative content" (p18).

- Interactivity in the digital age has changed the participant's sense of what his role is, tailoring his content to what social media indicates are the fans' big concerns. Fan-led content is the concept he invokes. "The main impact has been the interactive side of it, I think, for me. So 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're almost, you can create a lot of content just on fan opinion and what fans are talking about; what's the burning issue, what's the... It's almost like the trending topics about the club you're covering and what you need to go and do more, tailor your content towards that... you're expected to produce page views on day one. The best way to do that is to be the interactive fan-led content and engage with people. So you're the sort of hub of all that, all that chat and all that debate and all those issues" (p19).
- Sense emerges of audience metrics being a backdrop to the participant's working life, with digital data prompting "ruthless" decisions about what content is cut, such as grassroots sports, women's sport and youth sport. There is no scope for holding on to certain sports for "nostalgic" reasons. "It's there every day in our newsroom on the screen. Every day the long tail of content is analysed – why are you spending time doing stories that are only being read by a couple of hundred people? You can't do that anymore. You need to do more of that, less of that, spend more time on that... there's a lot more awareness of what performs well and we've been ruthless I think with digital, a lot of stuff that we now know we were only hanging onto for nostalgic reasons has just gone now – partly due to, you know, staffing levels, partly due to it just wasn't justifying the time being spent on it anyway" (p20). Coverage of certain sports that are considered mainstream but which don't yield strong metrics have also been dropped, such as horse racing, triggering mixed feelings in the participant. "I feel very torn as I feel like we're letting down the local sport community" (p21). Metrics also put added pressure on journalists, with their page views there for all to see in the newsroom. "You know there's a lot of pressure, a lot of journalists struggle with it because you know how many people have read your stories every day" (p25).
- Theme emerges of social media as a means of putting sports journalists under scrutiny, and of abuse on social media badly damaging a journalist's reputation. "A colleague of mine, a couple of years ago he did a hit-or-miss January signings feature on footballers and he gave "miss" to a footballer who had just recovered from cancer. And this was just supposed to be a bit of fun but he got so much abuse for it online that it almost finished him off in terms of reputation and, he, it was just one bad decision and he could have just done it on Twitter, this was actually an article, but you are one... I think you are under scrutiny all the time." (p25-26). However, it is now part of the job to receive some abuse online. "Obviously the less abuse you get the better but you've got to accept that you're going to get some at some point. Before you were untouchable, you were just working for a newspaper and nobody really could – I suppose they could write you a letter but often they wouldn't even have known your name. You're sort of right out there now to be shot at if you, if you make a bad judgment call" (p26).



## Interviewee 4 - Delta

### Transcript:

TB: Okay, [REDACTED], so it's quite a broad one to start off with and it's just about, umm, there's going to be quite an emphasis on your personal experience of issues and stuff so if you can incorporate those into your answers – really think about your own, as I say, kind of scenarios and experiences you've had in the job, that'd be really useful for the data.

Int4: Yep.

TB: So, yeah, in your experience what do you think are the main ethical issues affecting sports journalists in their day-to-day practice?

Int4: Probably get this one out of the way early – when you say “ethical issues” what sort of themes are you thinking about? So, just so I'm along the right lines.

TB: Yeah, yeah, sure, I don't want to put words in your mouth...

Int4: ...No, no...

TB:... In terms of – and the themes need to emerge as a consequence of the interview – but, I mean, broadly speaking what I'm potentially looking at are issues around objectivity potentially, issues around the relationships you might have with sources – whether you're maybe too close to those sources or whether you sometimes feel that you are too close and maybe that compromises your objectivity, just to link into that first issue of objectivity. Maybe, I mean part of what I'm looking at is that maybe social media, the rise of the digital age and social media, has posed fresh issues. So, with social media we obviously want to engage with audiences, but engaging with those audiences might mean that maybe we deviate from the traditional, very detached – in the case of the BBC maybe slightly, dare I say it, more traditional straight-laced approach of the BBC – to being a bit more spiky and whether that compromises integrity or...

Int4: Yeah, I think, just on those two points, umm, in terms of... It's quite difficult sometimes when you've got... So an example which has come out in one of the meetings I've just been in actually – we've the Premier League launch on Tuesday, a big media day, which the general public wouldn't necessarily care about but we'll get interviews with players. The players they put up aren't particularly high profile but we're going to go and we'll cover it because we want to make sure we're staying in with the Premier League, we want them on our side. However, on the same day we've got a study which is coming out which basically says that I think it's 10 per cent of Premier League clubs don't need ticket revenue to like break even – they just don't need any ticket revenue. So – and they already don't want us to publish it – so you've got that awkward – you're trying to do something positive to promote the Premier League but you've also got this story coming out which is, you know, a stats-piece saying, also, you're making a load of money off us. So it's just that awkward balance sometimes where you're not a mouthpiece for them, you have to remain impartial, but also you want to, you need to work with them and not against them, so I think that's, you know,

you can sometimes, you can write a story which they'll be annoyed about and for whatever reason, but we shouldn't not be writing that story – but sometimes you have to go, is it worth it for just a few pars on a website? Like, you know, are we doing stories for the right reasons. You want to make sure you're not, kind of... it's just striking that balance I guess between having them onside because we can work collaboratively and get so much more out of it, especially on social media, but also making sure we've got, you know, some journalistic integrity and say: no, this is a story and we're going to do it whether you're annoyed at us or not.

TB: Yeah, yeah. That's a good example you mention there, the kind of tension that can arise in terms of ensuring you have a decent relationship and access, and doing the thick-skinned stuff you need to do from time to time. Are there any other examples that you can think of, maybe in terms of, kind of, any personal relationships with managers – negotiating with managers in terms of stories and things like that – that you've had?

Int4: As in BBC managers, or...?

TB: ... Oh, no...

Int4: ... Ah, no, sorry...

TB: ... As in sport, football, cricket, managers...

Int4: Umm. There would have been when I was in [redacted] and had more direct contact with football managers and things like that. I remember, err [laughs], there were times where you'd put a story out and you'd think it was, I think it was [redacted], one of the players in an interview had just signed on loan and we'd done an interview with him and he'd said in the interview that he didn't realise [redacted] were actually in League Two and not League One. Like, he said it, "Oh, I thought they were League One." He was not joking. He just turned up, rocked up, done the interview, didn't know anything about the club, and obviously this is brilliant for us because we've got the interview and funny stories always do well on our website so I wrote it up. And obviously the club went into meltdown and said "You can't do this, he obviously was joking." He wasn't joking. But it was at that point my manager said to me "Well, we've run it but we wouldn't have done that necessarily the way you've done it on the radio." And I think that's maybe where the website has its own problems. When it's written down there's almost room for interpretation, and also it is there all the time, whereas on the radio you can say it and then five minutes later you've listened to something else and it's gone out of your head, whereas if it's being shared and it's written down that adds another elements to it.

TB: Yeah, I was going to jump in there and you used the word for me, I suppose it's the shareability of content, isn't it, the potential for it to go viral versus the fleetingness of... I mean of course you can get catch-up for radio but it's not quite like the ease with which it can be shared if it's on a website or in a tweet. So it's interesting the idea of the manager saying we do it differently from one platform to another, we do it differently from radio as we would to online.

Int4: Yeah, yeah. And the club were more annoyed that we'd written about it and it was there in black and white in print – you can change it, of course you can, but we didn't – and whereas if you listened to it, it had a... I mean the interviewer was like "What?..." – the conversation was quite interesting to listen to, but in written form it was very like, this player has made himself to look a bit of an idiot, and therefore the club didn't talk to us for a couple of weeks. But then eventually they move on and they let you back in again, but that is a hard thing because when you know you've got something which will do really well in terms of numbers and people will share, engage with and enjoy but it is almost knocking someone that's another problem that we have, especially with social media. You really have to tread that line quite carefully because you don't want to open people up to personal exposure, personal ridicule, because that's not fair.

TB: I suppose this ties in with maybe what you were saying all those years ago in a way, that with online and social you've almost got to choose your words carefully?...

Int4: ... Yeah...

TB: ... Even more carefully than if you were writing a script for radio, say, because as you say people can be held up for public pillory quite easily? Is that...

Int4: ... Yeah, yeah. And so another example for the social media point of view, you know it's such a simple thing to tag another athlete or something into a post but we have a 22 million audience, so if you – if they're directing any sort of abuse at the BBC that's fine because we're just a person sat behind a screen, but if you've tagged – I remember doing one. There had been a black and ethnic minority awards, and Mo Farah and I can't remember who else won, but Mo Farah was one of them and we put "congratulations" and tagged Mo Farah in it, and the abuse that was then directed to his twitter account – because he was tagged in it so people could, you know – all sorts of horrendous stuff, that we just had to take it down because we don't want to inflict that on someone. So it's ok kind of coming to ours because we can just ignore it, but when you're directing it towards someone who is unaware this has gone on and he's just like seeing all this hatred coming in. That's another thing, you've got to be careful who you're tagging, who you're mentioning and you've got to make sure you've got permission to do it a lot of the time.

TB: Ok, which obviously maybe wouldn't have been a question before you worked on the social media side?

Int4: Yeah.

TB: That's interesting then, umm, because the next question is about the idea of duties as a sports journalist, and the question is do you think a sports journalist has duties and, if so, to whom do they have those duties? I suppose in the answer you just gave you're very much saying, well, in certain cases now we've got a duty to the athlete to ensure they're not going to be opened up to vitriol or whatever it might be because of social media and the ease at which people can siphon off stuff in their direction. So this idea of duties, what would be your thoughts around that?

Int4: I think we have a duty to the audience to tell stories, first of all. That's quite a simple one. But I think there's a, umm... I'm just trying to think, I guess we've got to remain fair and therefore if we're doing more stories about one club for whatever reason then we have a duty to say why are we doing that? We've gone Man United-heavy for three or four weeks because there's loads of stuff going on. We kind of have to think are we being really one-eyed about this and I think sometimes we are guilty of doing that, especially with the bigger clubs. Umm, but I think the main one is having the duty to individual humans that we're telling the stories of, because you don't know how people are going to react and you don't know how, you know, well or how far and wide this is going to be shared so I think you do always have to think of that. For instance, there's an actor called Neil Patrick Harris who is an American actor – huge in America. Umm, and he was watching Man City for the first time the other day and he filmed himself saying “Go United!” and he was actually watching Man City. Now he put it all over his own personal channels and he's billions and billions of followers and someone said on my time, oh, you know, we should re-post that, we should do that, and I was like, he's an openly gay man, if we open it up on a sports channel it kind of feels like people are just gonna start bashing him for being gay or for being American. And I was like, I'm just not. I wasn't very comfortable doing it so we didn't do it and I noticed actually a lot of other people didn't as well. There were a few written pieces about it on Joe and other more kind of laddie ones, but I was just like, I don't think it's good enough content and also you have to think, you have to know how your audience can react to certain things and there are some awful keyboard warriors out there who will say horrible things and you're like, you have to kind of think is it worth it sometimes? And in terms of having a duty of care I feel like that is – I mean, he's got billions of followers, he probably wouldn't have even noticed, but also you don't want to encourage that sort of behaviour.

TB: Yeah, so it sounds like you're trying to be, you're almost anticipating the response from those said keyboard warriors in all these decisions you're making?

Int4: Yeah, yeah. Sometimes you just know you're going to get people saying “What the hell is this? BBC, why are you doing silly stuff?” And actually that's fine because we're trying to be a bit experimental and we're trying to bring in a new audience. That's fine, but I think it's when it's specifically about one person rather than a team or a brand or something. I think you've just got to be a bit careful not to invite singular abuse to one person, that's what I always look at whenever we're promoting anything online. Is that going to invite a lot of abuse?

TB: Yeah, ok. Will that leads on quite nicely into the next question...

Int4: ... I promise I haven't read them [laughs]!

TB: No, it's like a perfect segue! Umm, the next question is what you think are the most important ethical qualities or approaches that you think a sports journalist should have, and there you're obviously talking about respect for the individuals that you're covering really and trying to anticipate, you know, online reaction to stories that might involve them. So I suppose there's a kind of thoughtfulness there, a kind of not wanting to cause hurt. And you've mentioned fairness too in the context of balance and things. But what would you say

are the over-riding ethical qualities that sports journalists should strive for in the course of the conduct of their work?

Int4: Hmm, I'm trying to think of the most important thing... I guess for me personally it was always about making sure you give a balanced view on every single story, making sure you've got an opinion from both sides if it does involve two parties arguing or whatever. And making sure you've got your facts straight is the most important and will always be, you know... You don't want, especially with any social media content, you don't want to be hyping it up or sexing it up. You don't want to twist anything. You want to make sure that you're telling the story and it's the truth. You don't want to make it seem something that it's not and that's where – if that has ever happened – people pick up on that immediately and say “No, you've put a headline on this that doesn't represent the story” or “You've missed out that bit and therefore there's a gap there”, and I always think if you can make sure that you've ticked every box and said, “Yeah, I've checked all this and this is exactly how it is from both sides,” I think that's probably the most important thing.

TB: So in your experience then it sounds like the audience can hold you to account in a certain way, so you can – I wouldn't say they're acting as your conscience...

Int4: ... Yeah ...

TB: ... but they might give you certain prompts that make you think, actually, yeah, maybe I did slightly twist that?

Int4: And sometimes you can kind of twist stuff without even realising it. You know, especially if you're really, you know, into a story that you've been working on for weeks, you kind of get a bit clouded by it all and then you think “Oh no, did I? Oh no, maybe I have got that wrong.” But, yeah, I mean, the 22 million people that follow our account certainly let us know if we've got anything wrong [laughs] and they're the first to kind of say “No, that's not right” and sometimes they're right, a lot of the times they're not. But there are occasions where someone's pointed something out, either replied to tweets or left a comment on the bottom of an article and you think, “Actually, they've got a point there, we've missed part of this or we've not quite got it right.” And I think that's way although speed is everything in this game I think in terms of getting there first, getting the story first, I think getting it right is so much, you know, making sure you're 100 per cent sure that is the story. I think that's much more important.

TB: What bearing do codes of practice, codes of conduct, have over you in terms of determining maybe the decisions you make? And obviously for print journalists it's the Editors' Code of Practice, there's Ofcom and the BBC Editorial Guidelines. How large do they loom – how large do the latter loom – in terms of your decision-making?

Int4: Day-to-day it's quite rare that you need to, kind of, it's just a natural thing – you just know what your boundaries are a lot of the time from working there for so many years. But...

TB: ... Yeah, I was going to say, is that part of having been at the BBC for quite a while, that you feel that instilled?

Int4: Yeah, I think so. You know what, I think you kind of learn the hard way when you make a mistake and it gets pulled up and you think “Ok, I’ll never do that again.” Umm, and I think that is sometimes the only way to learn because, err, but especially in the BBC there’s a good hierarchy so, umm, you know from the grade that I was on there was always two, three people above me who were checking the work, commissioning the work so that alleviates any of the, you know, danger in terms of stepping outside the guidelines. Umm, maybe every once a month, if that, you know, you need to get Editorial Policy involved to check like, you know, or contact the lawyers. We’ve got a big hierarchy of people who are there to kind of make sure we’re not stepping outside those guidelines, so actually within the BBC it’s quite a good structure to work within because you know the boundaries and maybe sometimes we play it too safe because we are the BBC and we tend to be, “Ooh, we don’t want to upset anyone” but, umm, I think you’re better off being that way rather than being a bit maverick about it.

TB: So there’s almost the comfort of knowing there is that hierarchy. The hierarchy is a positive thing in that sense? Does it serve as a form of quality control but also kind of ethical control in a way?

Int4: Yeah, I think so, umm, and the way it tends to work – not always the case but certainly in my department – the people who are on the grades above you have been there longer so you trust that they know the Editorial Guidelines even more than you do, therefore you’re trusting their decisions. Sometimes you can have a debate about it and decide, you know, one of us is wrong and one is right, but I think it’s always better to have that discussion before anything gets published rather than thinking back afterwards in hindsight and going, oh yeah, why didn’t you pick up on this? That very rarely happens. It’s very structured and it’s something that our editor is very hot on, you know, keeping within the Code of Practice.

TB: So, and do you believe it’s important then to have that code of practice in place and for the industry more generally to have a, you know, regulator? Is that an important thing for the integrity of sports journalism and journalism more generally?

Int4: Well the thing is now of course you’ve got all sorts of people contributing to sports journalism who have no code, I mean bloggers and fan sites and you think about message boards and things like that, you know, they can do whatever the hell they want and essentially have no consequences and I think people come to the BBC because they know it’s a trusted source. That is the one crucial thing that we will always have, hopefully, umm, and therefore I think the guidelines have to be in place for that reason. Sometimes they can be frustrating but you know that they’re there for a reason, they’re not just made and someone’s gone, oh yeah, we’ll just do it like that. They’re there for a reason and they’re there to protect us and to protect our brand if you like, because people come to us because we’re trusted.

TB: Yeah. And I’m leaping a little bit ahead here in terms of looking at identity around sports journalists, but do you think in a way then that code serves as a means of professionally

setting you apart, identifying you as distinct from, as you say, those bloggers and the swirl of content elsewhere?

Int4: Yeah, yeah. People, I'll often have friends say to me, something's happening in the world of sport or news and they won't believe it's true until they see it on our website or they see it on our social media channels, and I think that's a really good thing for us to have, which is another reason why we have to be making sure, you know, accuracy is our main priority.

TB: Yeah, umm, now some sort of online and social media questions now which might seem a little bit, given what you're doing now, might seem a little bit too general but go into whatever detail you'd like. So, what impact do you believe the pressure to achieve high audience figures – particularly online, I'm thinking here – has had on the content of sports journalism? That might be the quality of it, that might be the quantity of it. What bearing do you think it's had?

Int4: Well we're quite lucky I think in the BBC that we don't rely on numbers. We'll keep going – well obviously if we start dropping like a stone then we've got a problem – but unlike for instance local papers who rely on those clicks for advertising and things like that, we're quite lucky in that we don't have to – we don't have targets which affect our business. However, if we know that a certain story will do well, we'll do it. And that can sometimes feel like, for instance our gossip column is our biggest-performing item every single day. It gets a million hits., and it's copying and pasting. But that's what people want. So you kinda have to go with what your audience want as much as you're going with what's happening in the news. So, umm, I think hits can be a really good measurement, like a good metric of how people are consuming our stories, but also we can be a little bit dictated by it at the same time. I think especially outside the BBC, that's very much, you know, it's all about numbers, numbers, numbers, like churning out things to make sure we're getting millions of hits, millions of shares. And we want that but we also need to maintain some integrity and keep the journalism to the highest quality as we can but delving into that market a little bit to get in that audience – that younger audience, the ones that are consuming our journalism on social media. But also making sure that we've got the kind of old school way of thinking: this is a good story therefore we're going to do it, and if it doesn't get as many hits as the one next to it then so be it but it's still on merit worth doing.

TB: So that drive to attract a younger, new younger audience, to get younger people involved in consuming BBC content, I mean, how much of a tension is that with playing things with a straight bat?

Int4: It's, it's almost like two different audiences sometimes. So it kind of feels like you'll do certain stories – I don't know, all the problems that they've been having with the Qatar World Cup – you know, to me, I don't particularly find that interesting. It's a bit dry but it's important news, like a human story that we have to tell, and we shouldn't ignore it. But also we're writing about, umm, a man dressing up as a fridge to be West Brom's mascot. You know it's just [laughs], that could be your, you could write two of those stories a day and I don't, like, this is... I think we're just trying to combine both and we'll let news stories be news stories because that's what they are, almost you kind of think, well, if younger people

read them then brilliant, but they're probably not going to because they're longer and they're harder to consume and they're a bit more gritty. But also we need to balance it with fun stuff, entertainment, and engaging quizzes and things like that. And I think part of my new role is to find a balance between the two, so we're trying to have fun stories but not write them like we're teenagers. We still want to write them in a solid BBC way but try and get them to different audiences so there's a bit of a combination there.

TB: Ok. I never thought I'd have the Qatari World Cup and a man dressed up as a fridge in the same sentence!

Int4: But they are two stories that happened on the same day and you're just like, well...

TB: Yeah, it's interesting, you know. One of the things I'm interested in is, kind of, the spectrum, the breadth of the spectrum, on which what constitutes stories for sports journalists, and it's interesting that you made that remark.

Int4: Sometimes I'll come into work and I'll see an email about something random and I'm like, this is mad. It's what people want.

TB: Yeah. So how has the rise of social media – and again you've already sort of, you mentioned Mo Farah being tagged in a tweet – in what ways has the rise of social media posed fresh ethical issues for sports journalists? I mean you're at the sharp end of this, I suppose, being a producer on social media. You know, you've already referred to obviously having to maybe anticipate how things might play out.

Int4: Umm, I mean, you're drawing attention to certain subjects so not just athletes, certain subjects you're going to be, you know, and especially if it's a story that's performing well you're going to repeat it throughout the day and people are gonna be more inundated with updates on certain stories if they are performing well. Umm, I think, you have to be, umm, we try and be more positive on social media. It's almost like our accounts have, it's a voice saying it to you rather than a... So when it's written down as a story, you're just reading it as you would any other story, anyone could have written it, unless it's a feature or anything like that. But a, say, football signing story, it's just the facts that are there. Sometimes we've got an additional voice if someone's, you know, analysis. With social media, we have a certain tone on the Match of the Day account which is very like football fan, using their sort of jargon, and I think on BBC Sport we try and be as positive as we can so actually you're not... I mean, on news stories it's a little bit different but we're, you know, if someone wins gold – if Laura Kenny wins gold – we very much, you know, get excited like the audience are. But people find that jars a bit because we're BBC and we're not meant to like anything, we're just meant to be very, very straight. And sometimes people will look at our social media and they're like, "What are you doing? You shouldn't be saying this you're the BBC." But actually that's how we've decided to do it because we want to be a voice which stands out and isn't just really straight, really monotonous and sort of classic news structure because as I said we want to get this new audience in. If we talk like a robot people aren't going to engage with it, so it does open up a few issues sometimes when we're trying to be a bit – I hate to use the word – but when we're trying to use a bit of banter, and that can, 'cos it's not – you're not meant to know who's typing it – it's meant to just be a generic



voice, but sometimes people are like, what are you doing, like. Why's the BBC saying this? That's quite difficult sometimes. We're still, you know, we've been going on those accounts for years now but we're still trying to find our voice and develop it as well, and try different things. We've tried a lot of new ways of talking and promoting things and using video and GIFs and things like that during the (2018) World Cup, and it worked but it's kind of died a little bit now and people are a bit like, well, "Why are you talking like this?" But during the World Cup everyone was engaging with it and feeling that it was really positive, so I think we may have to think of a new way to kind of talk to people and engage with them.

TB: So during the World Cup then was there an element of – not "cheerleading", it's a loaded term – but...

Int4: ... Yeah...

TB: ... An element of you engaging with the public mood and sort of responding to that and that being accepted by the public due to the wider circumstances?

Int4: Yeah, I think England was an interesting one actually because we weren't allowed to say – you're not really allowed to say – "Come on, England!" but we were engaging in all the "It's coming home" talk. And at times I was a bit like, should we be doing this? But then you've got your pundits in their *Match of the Day* studio cheering on England – you know Lineker, Shearer, people like that – so actually I don't think it was wrong necessarily. But at times I thought this was actually a real breakaway from what we've done before, but then you judge the mood of the nation. And if we're saying "England have scored" it's not representative of what everyone was doing, so you have to get on board with it but also remember that you're not meant to be an England supporter.

TB: So clickbait, has that ever been – you know, at the BBC obviously, as we've discussed, maybe it isn't such an issue – but has clickbait been an issue that's affected the newsroom?

Int4: In terms of how we sell our content, definitely. There's a fine balance between getting people back to your website through social media channels by putting a bit of mystery in a post and pure unadulterated clickbait, which is what other outlets tend to do, umm, the LADbibles of this world. We want a bit of that because there's a reason why they do it – 'cos it gets them loads of hits – but we also need to make sure we're not so, I guess, overt in doing it because people expect better of the BBC. And so each post, when we're trying to get people back to the website or back to iPlayer or whatever it is, we have to come up with a way of selling it so that people want to know more, but not tricking them to get them into something and then they're not seeing what they thought they were going to see. It takes a bit of work sometime, and actually a lot of the time we disagree – "Well I think that's clickbait", "Well I don't think that is" – so there's no sort of definitive, unless you really are spelling it out, which a lot of the other outlets do.

TB: So from what you're saying there, the definition of clickbait really for you, personally and maybe corporately at the BBC, is one where you kind of click through from social media to a story and you're disappointed in terms of how what you read reflects...

Int4: ... Yeah...

TB: ... So it's that sort of disappointment?

Int4: "Oh, you've sort of caught me and taken me in and now there are adverts popping up all over the place and things like that." We want people to come back to our website, we judge a lot of our social media content on referrals back to the website but you need to make sure you're doing it with a clear purpose of not trying to trick people.

TB: Ok. And connected to that, then, when you're maybe looking through different social media feeds and what have you, how large or how frequently do issues around kind of verification or fake news crop up in terms of stuff you maybe come across?

Int4: It's not so, err, in terms of social and perhaps writing stories with a social media element, it tends to be whether it's a mocked-up photo, or a video which has been staged. Umm, that's when you have to take a step back and go, is this legitimate? And actually it can be a real fuff to try and work out where the original has come from and whether it has been Photoshopped or whether someone has knocked up a letter from a chairman saying that – I had one today actually. Some Swindon fan had written out a letter saying that he'd been banned from the stadium for filming on his phone and I just couldn't work it out. But there were quite a few spelling mistakes in the letter and I just thought – and these little alarm bells like that – that you have to think before you go ahead and repost it, before you go ahead and write a story about it and create more interest in it. Is it for real, is it the real deal, has someone done it for a publicity stunt?

TB: Yeah, and in that particular instance were you able to determine that it was bogus?

Int4: I couldn't find the original fan, where it came from – it was on some football accumulator Twitter account – and I just, I kept looking and I thought maybe it's come off Facebook but I just could not find it. And a lot of people, again, you know, the chat around it was "Is this real? Is this real" And you kind of think, well, maybe it's not.

TB: And if you can't chart it back to an original post or the provenance of it then leave well alone?

Int4: Yeah.

TB: Yeah, yeah. So, a big – always a wry giggle before I ask this one – it sounds a bit like I've got you in for an interrogation, in your experience as a sports journalist have you ever encountered behaviour that has breached the law or ethical codes, or have you ever breached the law yourself? By the way as it says in the documentation it's all anonymised. So, yeah, in all seriousness, one of the purposes of this is to find out whether there is any trail of illegal behaviour that people might have come across in the course of sports journalism.

Int4: *Not that I'm aware of.* Umm, you've got me thinking now but I can't off the top of my head think of anything that I would, of any situation that I've been involved in.

TB: No, fine. So, and does that apply too – putting the law to one side – what about ethical, any kind of breaches of more guidelines or codes of practice?

Int4: Umm...

TB: And of course people might make occasional errors of judgement which might get pulled up by somebody but I'm thinking more about systematic, deliberate bad behaviour I suppose. Unethical behaviour rather than bad behaviour is probably a better way to put it.

Int4: I don't think so really. I guess the thing is because I've been, not just a writer, but I have, you know, been at a certain level for eight years, any sort of, *anything like that would have been a lot higher than me, so I, I've not ever been aware of anything. I'm sure it does go on in some places but not that I'm aware of.*

TB: Ok. So one of the things I'm looking at in the course of my research is the way in which sometimes, through the decisions that sports journalists make, they maybe, the information that's released out to the public sphere is limited for whatever reason, or restricted. And earlier on we spoke about the example of the player making a League One-League Two gaffe and the conversations about should we or shouldn't we report it. I mean, are there any kind of examples, or what extent do you think issues of self-censorship kind of curb – how prevalent do you think they might be within sports journalism? The idea of a sports journalist maybe sitting on something or deliberately muzzling themselves as it were, and not releasing to the public things which on the balance of assessment might be in the public interest. Do you think it occurs much?

Int4: I think, I think it probably goes on a lot more with the high-profile clubs, so Premier League, umm, I imagine if we – I say "we" as the BBC – if we want to keep a club on side and we know something then I guess there is always that thought in your head of: if I do this are they going to deny us access? Umm, I personally don't think there would be anyone who I work with anyway on our team who is scared to go up against a big club, because I think they'd always, as long as the story's right and, you know, accurate and things like that, I think you've always probably got a case to say "No, you can't control us like that". But as I said before certainly if it's, if it's a throwaway story that isn't in the public interest, is it worth doing? You'd probably have to just take a second and think is it worth annoying a club and possibly damaging a relationship if it's not worth it. But I think if it was a big enough story and if it was something, you know, that needed to be told I think, I've no doubt, the journalists I work with would be like that. And you know when I used to work, a lot more when I used to work [REDACTED] when I was interacting with managers on a weekly basis, here's always those conversations that you have where, yeah, you're sat having a cup of tea with them after a, I don't know, a press conference, or, and they tell you something and you think "Is this..." and, you know, you would determine if it was on the record or off the record and if it is off the record you'd think, "Oh, but if I could get... What am I going to do because this is a really good story" and I think there were times, especially because I was a bit, umm, a bit more naïve back then, where I'd just sit on it then the local papers would do

it and I'm like "Why didn't I do it?" But then the club would then get annoyed at the local paper for doing it and then they'd kind of think, oh, you didn't tell anyone. And they do, you know, there is a bit of a game there I think, especially at local level. But I've never really had to deal with anything which is particularly public interest in terms of the bigger stories.

TB: Yeah. You describe it as a "bit of a game" there and almost being rewarded in some respects by the club or the PR department...

Int4: ... Yeah...

TB: ... So what influence do you think public relations, media officers, do have over what is published by the media, by the sports media?

Int4: Umm, it's difficult to say because I think each press officer is different and some of them are very, umm, helpful and transparent and I think that always sits better with a journalist, to have, you know, even if they say "Look, you can't do anything on it but this is going to happen". You'd much rather that than them say, deny everything, and then 10 minutes later it all comes, so, you know, it's having that relationship, I guess. And each one, you know, is very different and each club is very different in the way that they handle situations. I, I think specifically in terms of the social media world, a lot of the clubs now want to keep it in-house. So any big ideas that we have they're like "Oh no, no, no, you can't do that because we're going to do that on our channels. We want to do it, we want to take sole ownership." They're almost like becoming, err, a news outlet themselves for doing, you know, videos and it's when they brand things "exclusive" – it's not an exclusive because it's your own club, you can't do that! [Laughs] That always really bugs me. Umm, so there's that other aspect of it as well where they want to make sure they keep everything within their own house so they get the hits, they get the praise for it, and they don't want to source anything out, whereas I think it probably used to be that, you know, if you got it on the BBC then... and still some, outside of football certainly, still some sports are over the moon if the BBC want to come and do stuff, you know, the rugby league at the weekend we've got access all areas, we got in the dressing room, because they want people to know about it, but I think football clubs tend to be a lot more closed off. And they don't need us as much as they used to because they've got their own, you know, their own audience that we want to tap into. And they sometimes want to tap into ours but they're a bit more protective I think.

TB: Yeah, thanks. One thing I've come across when reading around the ethics of sports journalism and the way that sports journalists have been characterised in the past is that there's one saying that sports journalists belong to the toy department of the news organisations they work for, in as much as the work they do and the topics they cover may be a bit more trivial than some of the stuff that news journalists cover, and that maybe sports journalists are guilty of sort of cheerleading from time to time – I used that word earlier. Do you think those characterisations are fair?

Int4: Erm, I don't think sports journalists will ever say that but I can see that news sometimes, yeah, I think they have a different approach to things, although now I feel like news are kind of going for the more frivolous, umm, almost like the social media stories, even on like the Six O'Clock News you see stuff like that now and you sometimes think, ohh,

they never would have done this a few years ago. So I think the news landscape is changing and perhaps they're going towards more how sport have been for a longer period of time. I don't really know, I don't have much to do with news here, but I know when I was in a smaller newsroom there was that sense sport was a bit of an afterthought sometimes, because they just thought you play a match and you get a result – that's all it is – but there's a lot of great stuff to come out of sport, you know, interesting human interest stories and things like that, umm, and I think perhaps they didn't, they did kind of go "Oh, it's just – just – sport." But I think it's probably changing now. People realise how big an audience we've got as well, especially on our social media here – that people actually want a piece of that now.

TB: Yeah, so you're talking there maybe when you were based in [REDACTED] you were slightly made to feel a bit more on the periphery?

Int4: Yeah, so, because you're quite often dictated to by television output. So on, you know, the regional news you've got 20 minutes of news and then five minutes of sport. And I guess that's the way in linear television, that's how it's always been. Whereas I think it probably warrants more than that but you're never going to get more than five minutes on TV, and I think TV is very much at the top of the food chain in that sense.

TB: Ok, ok. Umm, so tapping into a little bit of what you say there do you think it's the case or maybe it was the case in the past – and less the case now – that sports journalists spend too much time on-diary and not enough time off-diary? So maybe there's the temptation to fall into that weekly rhythm of a couple of matches and a press conference. Yeah, how prominent, or how much emphasis, is there given to the off-diary as well as the...

Int4: ... So the bigger pieces?

TB: Yeah, the more, I suppose the more investigative, harder news stuff, the stuff that's away from the kind of run-of-the-mill diary stuff.

Int4: Yeah, obviously we're quite a big organisation here on the ground floor in the online bit, and **it is a bit of a factory sometimes**. You know, we do shift work, we have to be open for business from 6am until midnight, so therefore you have to be staffed that way. Umm, **we've had a few changes in our department in the last year or so which has allowed the more newsy sports news journalists to have time off rota to do these extra projects. And I think that's not only made the work force a lot happier because they're able to get their teeth into something and they're not just churning out copy, you know, story after story after story every day. Umm, I feel like people are happier when they can get their teeth stuck into everything**, but also when you're running a website which has, not has to produce certain stories a day, but there is a certain number of stories we really have to do a day, umm, then there's striking that balance. Umm, I think we'd all like to work on bigger projects but really it's not realistic, I don't think. I think you probably get more scope to do that in certain jobs in newspapers. But when you're a 20-hour operation or whatever we are – and you've got all the live sport and things like that – there is a certain amount of, like, you just have to get stories done and churned out and get on to the next one.

TB: Yeah, ok. So, a few questions now about, kind of, your sense of what it is to be a sports journalist and maybe how that sense of what a sports journalist's role is has maybe shifted as technology has changed. Umm, I think probably your CV as it were maybe makes you a good person to ask about this. Can you describe in any way how the increased prominence of digital and social media has maybe affected your sense of what it is to be a sports journalist today?

Int4: I think the weird thing is, when I first started it was just sort of creeping in. So I've never really known a time when there hasn't been social media.

TB: So what year did you start with the BBC?

Int4: So I started in [REDACTED]. So, Twitter had kind of just started. I mean Facebook was around but we didn't use it for news, we just used it for personal accounts. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] it was just a secondary, additional thing that we used, sometimes to gather news, sometimes just to chat with your mates. And now it's turned into this massive beast which we use as a promotional tool, which we use to talk to our audience and, umm, so it's a huge part of what we do now. You know, our social media team is as big as our newsdesk team now. We've got six or seven assistant producers, three producers and an editor – and that's our social media team.

TB: So, sorry, just to clarify, the social media team is seven assistant...

Int4: ... Six, I think at the moment. So, yeah, six assistant producers, three producers and an editor. So, umm, it's still a relatively small team [REDACTED], but actually that is, you know, on a day-to-day basis we'll have four writers for the website and that's it, so two earlies, two lates. So we'll sometimes have more social media people in than writers, which seems mad but actually we're constantly churning, you know, it's a different pace I think. Twitter's a constant stream of news, we've got Facebook to look after, Instagram, you've got videos, you've got live streaming that we have to deal with, so all the different sports that we're live streaming. You've got to deal with forward planning, working to TV. There are just so many different strands to it and it's all based around social media. So it has become such a massive part of everything we do and sometimes we make editorial judgements, you know, based on, you know, will this do well on social media? Will this appeal to our social media audience? And that's, you know, website stories that we're writing thinking it's for that audience. So it's just become such a huge part of what we do, and it's only going to get bigger I think as well.

TB: Yeah. And you mentioned a couple of times, particularly early on in the interview, about how you're thinking about the interaction with the audience and I suppose although clearly, you know, the clues in the name isn't it, social media's always had that interactive element to it, but when thinking about how your sense of what it is to be a journalist has changed, do you think that element of interactivity and almost anticipation of the online audience has grown stronger and affected your...

Int4: Absolutely. I think, as I said before, you know, if you think something is going to go down really well with your audience, if you see something really funny for instance that happens at the football or whatever, then you think, "That is absolutely going to fly and everyone's going to lap this up." So, you're thinking, I mean, you can't put all the audience into one, you know, demographic, but you know what does well and you learn over time what's going to do well and what doesn't. So, you know, we're very much thinking about our audience and in terms of engaging it's funny because we never used to reply to people. Now we're constantly having conversations with them because we want people to feel like we're not just posting things and then not looking at them again. We want people to speak to us. And it's almost like, you, back to news on football forums, chat rooms and things like that – it's almost we're going back to that and making it so that we – *Match of the Day* for instance – are speaking to Joe Bloggs, the football fan, because we want to feel people are part of it, part of a community, part of a, you know, yeah, part of a football community, even if it's a huge one, even if it's Man United – of course they've got billions of fans – but we want to talk to you about it, and not just you as a mass of people. It's like talking to the individuals.

TB: Yeah, so you've kind of answering this next question which is about how things have changed in terms of your, err, the work you do on a typical day as it were since a decade ago from when you started. I mean, and I know your job title, your role has changed, but is there fundamentally a shift in broader mentality of a sports, of an online sports journalist at the BBC?

Int4: Oh absolutely, yeah. I mean now it's not just, umm, I would say actually there's a lot less what we'd call phone-bashing and things like that on a day-to-day basis. There is still an element of that to chase stories but, you know, we have news services that provide us with copy so we'll use PA, or AFP, people like that. So there's that element of rewriting copy to do quick stories and things like that. You have to be able to write live text, which is another different way of approaching writing and journalism, umm, obviously again you have that personality and that voice that comes through. You know, you have to write match reports, you have to speak to – I hate the word – but we use the word "talent", which is like our, you know, the Mark Lawrensons and the Alan Shearers of the world – it's what we call them, "talent". Umm, and err, you have to be able to speak to them and interview them and turn that into an analysis piece and then also, I mean, the all-round journalist will also do social media, and know how to speak in that language as well and write for that audience. So, it's not just, you're never just a news journalist or a sports news journalist anymore, you have to have so many strings to your bow. And some people even go out and film stuff and edit it, and that's part of your role now. Doing radio hits if you're at a ground somewhere and they've not got anyone else. You have to work across all those different platforms and that's how it's really evolved over the last, in my time, you know. We never, when I first trained I think I only did radio and training we maybe did a day of online. Now it's, it's a huge part of your learning process doing the written stuff as well.

TB: So with this interactivity with the audience having increased and you mentioned about the bloggers and the vloggers and the more kind of blokey websites as you called them. I mean, how's that affected your sense of what it is to be a sports journalist? How do you see yourself professionally as distinct from other people who produce content about sport? So I



suppose the distinction is between sports content producers versus sports journalists. There are plenty of people who aren't sports journalists who produce content, so it's how do we calibrate the difference between the two?

Int4: Umm, I guess, I mean having the brand – the BBC – helps you massively. But also I think it's about, umm, still – it's about not dumbing down – which a lot of people when we started doing this type of content thought that we were doing. We're not, we're just delving into that, sort of, what other people are doing but we need to try and do it in a, in a BBC way rather than... I guess it's like the theory of having, so we have obviously a core audience but you don't want to be the dad at the disco. That's how we always say it, you know, you don't want to be a 40-year-old man talking the language of a teenager because it just doesn't work, and I think sometimes that's what people think we're guilty of, is just trying to be young and hip, and that's not what we're trying to do, we're just trying to engage with a different audience away from our core audience and I think people do struggle with that sometimes. But, umm, I think the fact that we don't have any advertising and things like that really helps. Umm, we do on our international site but, for instance, if you click through from, err, I'm just trying to think of an example, Joe – Joe.co.uk – you'll click through to them and you'll see that it's a paid article; they've been paid to write this story or, you know, and we don't have that and I think that will always stand us in good stead rather than just doing content – we've still got, we're still impartial. And we're doing this story because we believe that our audience want to see it and we've told the story in the right way, whereas I think when there's money changing hands and you're being paid to advertise and things like that, that's when it gets a bit, I think from a personal point of view anyway, when I'm clicking through things like that, it doesn't give it any... I would still go to the BBC and think "they're going that piece but we know they're not getting paid for it. They are doing it because they think it's of interest." And I think that where we always, hopefully always, have that integrity.

TB: And I suppose – the next question was going to be about whether you'd ever thought about, whether you regard the sports journalism that you do and sports journalism as being a profession or a trade or a craft or how you view it. And I suppose, would it be fair to say that, if you're writing sports content from a BBC perspective versus that scenario you've described where you're writing it as a hack, where someone's paying you to produce content of a certain nature – maybe you'd characterise one as being a profession and the other as being maybe something different? I mean, do you have thoughts on that? How do you view what you do day-to-day?

Int4: I've always considered it a profession I think. I've never really thought about it [laughs]. But, yeah, I... I guess there is a sense of, you know, I'm sure other people who work for the, umm, the private, would you call it the private sphere? I don't know whether it is, but the, you know, when you are being paid to advertise certain things, like, I'm sure they're in a similar position where you're constantly trying to churn out stuff and get as many hits as possible, but I guess the difference is that's because they need money behind it, whereas we've got a bit more freedom to say "Ok, well that didn't work, that's ok, that's fine." Umm, but yeah, I've always seen it being a profession, I think. I'm thinking about it now [laughs].



TB: Ok, so just a couple of questions to go. How firm do you think the distinction is today between sports journalism and sports PR?... I suppose, maybe, working for the BBC, as you've already described, you've got that sort of – luxury maybe isn't quite the right word but you know for example that, as you've described, if a story doesn't quite work out it's not the end of the world, you just maybe note that for the future and don't follow that tack again. But, umm, do you think there is an, in an age where some people say so much stuff now is generated one way or the other from PR or in-house club stuff, that how rigid do you think the distinction is between sports journalism and sports PR?

Int4: Well I think for instance we had the other day, err, I feel like sometimes the clubs go on a bit of an offensive in terms of making their players or athletes relatable. And that's sometimes a hard judgement call. We had a story the other day from Chelsea. They were on their pre-season tour of Australia. A couple of their players went to a kid's house and had a barbecue with him and it was filmed for Chelsea TV and things like that. But actually it was a really nice story and the kid's reaction was great and there were some really nice pictures, so we decided to do it but our news editor who comes from a local paper background kind of said, "This is a PR exercise. They want you to... they want news outlets to pick this up to make them look good." And I was like, yeah, but a lot of that happens, but you've just got to pick the best ones from that bunch sometimes. And it did kind of creep into my head that should we be doing this, but we had access to the pictures and I just thought people will lap this up, it's a really feel-good story. But we do have that kind of, is it a publicity stunt, should we be writing this? But I think that's the first – with stories like that – I try and think that's the first question: why are they doing this? Are they going on a charm offensive? Umm, so I think the lines can blur quite a bit but I think that means we just have to think things through a bit harder and not just rush into doing something. Who's this for and why are they doing this?

TB: Sorry I should have asked this earlier when we're talking about it, but in terms of values and ethical values, where do you think as a sports journalist your sense of values comes from? Is it from, maybe, editors, colleagues within the newsroom? Is it, like you said earlier, maybe an element now of almost, kind of, the audience nudging your conscience in certain ways?

Int4: Probably a bit of both, I think when you're in a newsroom especially you learn from people, especially when you first arrive you have to learn on the job because you're not used to, you know, it's not something that – although you've gone to university until you actually go and do it, you do your first story and you annoy your first football manager [laughs], you kind of don't know. You have to trip up along the way I think sometimes so I think you learn from the people around you and you always know as well that other people have had to go through the same things when they start out. So I think that's what shapes, that's certainly what's shaped my ethical views on terms of being a journalist is that I learnt off other people and people who have been through it and also people who've, I mean, I've only ever worked at the BBC in terms of in journalism so I think people who come into the BBC externally you can learn a lot from them as well. Umm, and certainly there's a lot of people in our newsroom who've come from newspapers, which is a very different background. You learn as much from them as from someone who's come in, like we've got a guy who works for us who's come in from Liverpool TV. So there's like a lot of different

backgrounds in that newsroom where you can take bits off and hopefully, you know, now I'm one of the older ones, you know, you pass that on to other people as well with the new people that come in, and you learn off them. But I think the audience, certainly in the social media role, umm, it does make you think about people who aren't journalists and how they shape your thinking, because sometimes you're in your own journalistic bubble so there is that element. But I think, in terms of over my career, it's certainly been other people who I've worked with and the newsroom environment which has taught me, you know, just shaped my way of thinking.

TB: Yeah. Ok. So, finally, what do you think are the essential characteristics that define a sports journalist in today's digital world?

Int4: Umm, multi-tasker. You don't just write a story anymore. You sometimes, like I said before, sometimes you have to if you get the story you have to think: how am I writing it? Who am I writing it for? You go to the social media team and say, "This is how I'm going to do this, this is what you have at your disposal." You go radio and say, "I've got this interview, it's only on my phone but I can edit it." Then TV. You know, you have to, especially here, you have to go to all these different outlets, so you have to be able to multi-task and think across those different platforms. So it's not just a simple – not that it ever was simple – but just, you know, writing it out – bang, there you go. Other characteristics... I think you have to have some tenacity about you to, especially if you know there's a story there and it is harder nowadays to stop things from getting out. You know if you're sat on a story and you think, no, you know, I believe that this is the story that I want to write, umm, you have to trust your instincts and really battle sometimes, umm, because there's so much out there now, there's so much content out there, and there are so many stories out there. I think you have to be quite, umm, forceful if you really believe in the story that you're writing about to make it stand out and to say, you know, this is important, this is what I want to write about. Umm, and I think also, which a few people, you know, certain members of our team of a different generation they have to embrace social media as well. I think that's one thing with a lot of older journalists, they just think it's throwaway, I don't know. They don't understand that it's such a useful tool for us. And it doesn't have to be a negative thing. If you get on board with it it can do a world of good in terms of your brand and in terms of, umm, you know, selling your content and opening it up to new audiences because, you know, soon enough one audience is going to, you know, move away and we're going to have all these young people and we need to say, like, "We've got stuff for you, come with us." And that's one big thing that we've been doing and I think, umm, if you – you know, as a modern day journalist I think you have to embrace it. You have to. And you have to embrace new technologies and new ways of, of doing journalism so it's not just simple, you know, punch in a story and there, you're done. You have to think about all the different elements that go with it and how you can tell it to different audiences.

TB: Thank you very much.

Int4: I've rambled on.

TB: No, you haven't rambled on at all. Thanks so much.

## Delta – Initial Distillation:

- The participant was keenly aware of the power of social media to be a conduit for abuse, and many of her answers touched on this. As such, the complexities of what to run and what not to run on social media was a thread that ran through her interview. In particular, this issue arises when there is a story that it is felt will go down well with the online audience but which is in some way critical of an individual. “When you know you’ve got something which will do really well in terms of numbers and people will share, engage with and enjoy but it is almost knocking someone that’s another problem that we have, especially with social media. You really have to tread that line quite carefully because you don’t want to open people up to personal exposure, personal ridicule, because that’s not fair” (p3). Journalists running the BBC’s social media accounts therefore need to be careful about who they tag or @mention in posts. She gives a powerful example involving Mo Farah, the distance runner: “And so another example for the social media point of view, you know it’s such a simple thing to tag another athlete or something into a post but we have a 22 million audience, so if you – if they’re directing any sort of abuse at the BBC that’s fine because we’re just a person sat behind a screen, but if you’ve tagged – I remember doing one. There had been a black and ethnic minority awards, and Mo Farah and I can’t remember who else won, but Mo Farah was one of them and we put “congratulations” and tagged Mo Farah in it, and the abuse that was then directed to his twitter account – because he was tagged in it so people could, you know – all sorts of horrendous stuff, that we just had to take it down because we don’t want to inflict that on someone. So it’s ok kind of coming to ours because we can just ignore it, but when you’re directing it towards someone who is unaware this has gone on and he’s just like seeing all this hatred coming in. That’s another thing, you’ve got to be careful who you’re tagging, who you’re mentioning and you’ve got to make sure you’ve got permission to do it a lot of the time” (p3). And again: “I think you’ve just got to be a bit careful not to invite singular abuse to one person, that’s what I always look at whenever we’re promoting anything online. Is that going to invite a lot of abuse?” (p4).
- The participant initially states that she believes a sports journalist’s primary responsibility is to their audience. “I think we have a duty to the audience to tell stories, first of all” (p3). However, later on – tying in with the bullet point above – she suggests the primary duty is to the athletes who are covered. “But I think the main one is having the duty to individual humans that we’re telling the stories of, because you don’t know how people are going to react and you don’t know how, you know, well or how far and wide this is going to be shared so I think you do always have to think of that.” It seems the unpredictable impact of sharing content via social media has arguably made the sense of duty towards an article’s subject stronger. This could potentially have a chilling effect, prompting certain content to go unpublished. This is a form of self-censorship.
- The participant stresses that the audience, through social media, hold the BBC to account in terms of the accuracy and balance of their reporting. Anything sensationalised is called out by the audience. “You don’t want, especially with any social media content, you don’t want to be hyping it up or sexing it up. You don’t want to twist anything. You want to make sure that you’re telling the story and it’s the truth. You don’t want to make it seem something that it’s not and that’s where – if that has ever happened – people pick up on that immediately and say ‘No, you’ve put a headline on this that doesn’t represent the story’ or ‘You’ve missed out that bit and therefore there’s a gap there’... The 22 million people that follow our account certainly let us know if we’ve got anything wrong [laughs] and they’re the first to kind of say ‘No, that’s not right’ and sometimes they’re right, a lot of the times they’re not” (p5).
- As might be expected from a BBC journalist who has only ever worked for the BBC, there is an emphasis on accuracy over speed. “Although speed is everything in this game I think in

terms of getting there first, getting the story first, I think getting it right is so much, you know, making sure you're 100 per cent sure that is the story. I think that's much more important" (p5).

- Not aware of any illegal behaviour by sports journalists. On the issue of guidelines, the participant gave the sense that it is habit – almost a process of acculturation – that creates a sense of values within the BBC. Knowing what the limits are for the BBC is almost instinctive for her. "It's just a natural thing – you just know what your boundaries are a lot of the time from working there for so many years" (p5). There is also a sense of being protected by "the hierarchy" and of trusting her superiors, to an extent that the responsibility of complying with the guidelines can be devolved onto them. "Especially in the BBC there's a good hierarchy so, umm, you know from the grade that I was on there was always two, three people above me who were checking the work, commissioning the work so that alleviates any of the, you know, danger in terms of stepping outside the guidelines...We've got a big hierarchy of people who are there to kind of make sure we're not stepping outside those guidelines, so actually within the BBC it's quite a good structure to work within... The people who are on the grades above you have been there longer so you trust that they know the editorial guidelines even more than you do, therefore you're trusting their decisions" (p6)
- The guidelines also serve for the participant to distinguish the BBC's bona fide journalism from citizen journalists. So, the code functions as a means of defining the journalist's professional status, and also reinforcing the BBC's brand and reputation for reliability. "You've got all sorts of people contributing to sports journalism who have no code, I mean bloggers and fan sites and you think about message boards and things like that, you know, they can do whatever the hell they want and essentially have no consequences and I think people come to the BBC because they know it's a trusted source. That is the one crucial thing that we will always have, hopefully, umm, and therefore I think the guidelines have to be in place for that reason. Sometimes they can be frustrating but you know that they're there for a reason, they're not just made and someone's gone, oh yeah, we'll just do it like that. They're there for a reason and they're there to protect us and to protect our brand if you like, because people come to us because we're trusted" (p6).
- The number of hits and shares a story receives is not the only marker of an article's success, although even some BBC content is done with a view to chasing unique viewing figures and, importantly, a younger audience. "Our gossip column is our biggest-performing item every single day. It gets a million hits, and it's copying and pasting. But that's what people want. So you kinda have to go with what your audience want as much as you're going with what's happening in the news. I think hits can be a really good measurement, like a good metric of how people are consuming our stories, but also we can be a little bit dictated by it at the same time. I think especially outside the BBC, that's very much, you know, it's all about numbers, numbers, numbers, like churning out things to make sure we're getting millions of hits, millions of shares. And we want that but we also need to maintain some integrity and keep the journalism to the highest quality as we can but delving into that market a little bit to get in that audience – that younger audience, the ones that are consuming our journalism on social media. But also making sure that we've got the kind of old school way of thinking: this is a good story therefore we're going to do it, and if it doesn't get as many hits as the one next to it then so be it but it's still on merit worth doing" (p7).
- In the quest to attract and retain a younger audience, the participant referred to the sense of at times trying to cater for two different audiences. The traditional sports news (older audience) is alongside the sportainment (younger audience): "it's almost like two different audiences sometimes. So it kind of feels like you'll do certain stories – I don't know, all the problems that they've been having with the Qatar World Cup – you know, to me, I don't particularly find that interesting. It's a bit dry but it's important news, like a human story that we have to tell, and we shouldn't ignore it. But also we're writing about, umm, a man

dressing up as a fridge to be West Brom's mascot... I think we're just trying to combine both and we'll let news stories be news stories because that's what they are, almost you kind of think, well, if younger people read them then brilliant, but they're probably not going to because they're longer and they're harder to consume and they're a bit more gritty. But also we need to balance it with fun stuff, entertainment, and engaging quizzes and things like that. And I think part of my new role is to find a balance between the two, so we're trying to have fun stories but not write them like we're teenagers... Sometimes I'll come into work and I'll see an email about something random and I'm like, this is mad. It's what people want" (p7-8).

- A sense of BBC Sport still trying to find the right 'voice' for its social media content also emerges, as the corporation seeks to retain its value of impartiality alongside the need to attract a younger audience. "With social media, we have a certain tone on the *Match of the Day* account which is very like football fan, using their sort of jargon, and I think on BBC Sport we try and be as positive as we can so actually you're not... I mean, on news stories it's a little bit different but we're, you know, if someone wins gold – if Laura Kenny wins gold – we very much, you know, get excited like the audience are. But people find that jars a bit because we're BBC and we're not meant to like anything, we're just meant to be very, very straight. And sometimes people will look at our social media and they're like, "What are you doing? You shouldn't be saying this you're the BBC." But actually that's how we've decided to do it because we want to be a voice which stands out and isn't just really straight, really monotonous and sort of classic news structure because as I said we want to get this new audience in. If we talk like a robot people aren't going to engage with it, so it does open up a few issues sometimes when we're trying to be a bit – I hate to use the word – but when we're trying to use a bit of banter, and that can, 'cos it's not – you're not meant to know who's typing it – it's meant to just be a generic voice, but sometimes people are like, what are you doing, like. Why's the BBC saying this? That's quite difficult sometimes. We're still, you know, we've been going on those accounts for years now but we're still trying to find our voice and develop it as well" (p8). This theme reappears later in the interview: "But you don't want to be the dad at the disco. That's how we always say it, you know, you don't want to be a 40-year-old man talking the language of a teenager because it just doesn't work, and I think sometimes that's what people think we're guilty of, is just trying to be young and hip, and that's not what we're trying to do, we're just trying to engage with a different audience away from our core audience and I think people do struggle with that sometimes" (p16).
- Participant says there is a "fine balance" between a canny social media post and clickbait, and admits there is often disagreement between the BBC Sports social media team about whether something they've posted is clickbait or not. "There's a fine balance between getting people back to your website through social media channels by putting a bit of mystery in a post and pure unadulterated clickbait, which is what other outlets tend to do, umm, the LADbibles of this world. We want a bit of that because there's a reason why they do it – 'cos it gets them loads of hits – but we also need to make sure we're not so, I guess, overt in doing it because people expect better of the BBC. And so each post, when we're trying to get people back to the website or back to iPlayer or whatever it is, we have to come up with a way of selling it so that people want to know more, but not tricking them to get them into something and then they're not seeing what they thought they were going to see. It takes a bit of work sometime, and actually a lot of the time we disagree... 'Well I think that's clickbait', 'Well I don't think that is'" (p9).
- Issues of verification and fake news are time-consuming for BBC Sport. "In terms of social and perhaps writing stories with a social media element, it tends to be whether it's a mocked-up photo, or a video which has been staged. Umm, that's when you have to take a step back and go, is this legitimate? And actually it can be a real fuff to try and work out

where the original has come from and whether it has been Photoshopped or whether someone has knocked up a letter from a chairman saying that – I had one today actually. Some Swindon fan had written out a letter saying that he'd been banned from the stadium for filming on his phone and I just couldn't work it out. But there were quite a few spelling mistakes in the letter and I just thought – and these little alarm bells like that – that you have to think before you go ahead and repost it, before you go ahead and write a story about it and create more interest in it. Is it for real, is it the real deal, has someone done it for a publicity stunt?" (p10).

- BBC Sport journalists not afraid to stand up to clubs and publish even if it could annoy a club, although unlikely to do it if it is a "throwaway" story. But that begs the question: when is a story sufficiently big that it is *worth* jeopardising a relationship? "If we want to keep a club on side and we know something then I guess there is always that thought in your head of: if I do this are they going to deny us access? I personally don't think there would be anyone who I work with anyway on our team who is scared to go up against a big club, because I think they'd always, as long as the story's right and, you know, accurate and things like that, I think you've always probably got a case to say 'No, you can't control us like that'. But as I said before certainly if it's, if it's a throwaway story that isn't in the public interest, is it worth doing? You'd probably have to just take a second and think is it worth annoying a club and possibly damaging a relationship if it's not worth it. But I think if it was a big enough story and if it was something, you know, that needed to be told I think, I've no doubt, the journalists I work with would be like that" (p11).
- A sense emerges of clubs themselves now being rivals to the BBC. "I think specifically in terms of the social media world, a lot of the clubs now want to keep it in-house. So any big ideas that we have they're like "Oh no, no, no, you can't do that because we're going to do that on our channels. We want to do it, we want to take sole ownership." They're almost like becoming, err, a news outlet themselves for doing, you know, videos and it's when they brand things "exclusive" – it's not an exclusive because it's your own club, you can't do that! [Laughs] That always really bugs me" (p12).
- BBC Sport reporting team "happier" now that they have been given more time off-diary to pursue projects in depth. "It is a bit of a factory sometimes... We've had a few changes in our department in the last year or so which has allowed the more newsy sports news journalists to have time off rota to do these extra projects. And I think that's not only made the work force a lot happier because they're able to get their teeth into something and they're not just churning out copy, you know, story after story after story every day. Umm, I feel like people are happier when they can get their teeth stuck into everything" (p13)
- Social media is marking a profound change in the participant's working life as a sports journalist. On occasions, BBC Sport now has more social media people on shift than writers. "Now it's turned into this massive beast which we use as a promotional tool, which we use to talk to our audience and, umm, so it's a huge part of what we do now. You know, our social media team is as big as our news desk team now. We've got six or seven assistant producers, three producers and an editor – and that's our social media team... we'll sometimes have more social media people in than writers, which seems mad but actually we're constantly churning, you know, it's a different pace I think... So it has become such a massive part of everything we do and sometimes we make editorial judgements, you know, based on, you know, will this do well on social media? Will this appeal to our social media audience? And that's, you know, website stories that we're writing thinking it's for that audience. So it's just become such a huge part of what we do, and it's only going to get bigger I think as well" (p14).

## Interviewee 5 - Epsilon

### Transcript:

TB: So again, as I say, it's all about personal experience, so in your personal experience what are the main ethical issues affecting sports journalists in the course of their work?

Int5: It's a really nice broad bat to start with. Umm, I'll be honest, for me [REDACTED] the first thing there aren't too many ethical issues [REDACTED]. When it comes to being a sports reporter I suppose, yeah, there's always a fine line of where you're intruding into someone's personal life and where that affects what they're doing on a pitch – where there is an invasion of privacy and when is that in the public interest? The biggest example being right now Ben Stokes in the cricket and Danny Cipriani in the rugby. So you've got to ask yourself: what is in the public interest? How much information are we giving out? I suppose it's those where sport and news mix, you know. Being a sportsman or sportswoman did you sign up to be a role model? Discuss. Or did you just sign up to be really good at the sport? The lines get blurred perhaps a little bit more when someone is saying well I want to sell you this shirt for this company and I want to promote this brand, well it's like you can't do all those things if you just want to be a sportsman. When you start going down those advertising, sponsorship roles and you're taking money for those kind of products you are putting yourself further in the public eye away from your sport, therefore that's where we as journalists it's a little bit more fair game, I suppose. But, yeah, does that make any sense at all?

TB: It does and I was just going to use that very phrase you used at the very end which was "fair game". So you've clearly got it mapped out in your own head about what you think does push a sportsperson into that realm of more fair game?

Int5: You can't have it both ways and I think that is fair. Maybe the expression "fair game" isn't what I would use if I was in a slightly more professional environment than having a coffee with you across a table. But, yeah, you can't have it both ways. You can't expect to turn up and, you know, double your pay cheque by doing all the extras, and ask us as media – whatever media that may be, whether it be sports media, news media, entertainment media – to be there to take your picture, to promote it, and then not expect when something goes wrong for that not to be reported. Unfortunately, it doesn't work.

TB: Can you give – you mentioned Stokes and Cipriani there – but can you mention an example from your own experience maybe where you've had to navigate that line between a right to privacy for the person that's being reported on and the spilling into the public interest?

Int5: I can give you an example where we haven't, err, given it anything that I would describe as anything salacious or extra. The one that stands out to me slightly is, I'm sure people remember the [REDACTED] scandal with the [REDACTED] that was involved. Umm, that was always given as a very straight story about the [REDACTED], his name was [REDACTED]. I don't think we ever gave out any detail about his personal life in

anyway, umm, how it necessarily impacted him professionally and what he did afterwards, it was just a straight story, because at what point has that guy in any way done any of those things we previously discussed i.e. wanted to promote a brand in any way or done those things. No, he's just been there to do his job. Umm, he's clearly been through a court and been found guilty for what he did, that's not necessarily a court of law, that was a sports disciplinary tribunal that he went through. But at the same time that has affected him professionally, but that's just the story – there's nothing else to add to that.

TB: So he got a different treatment to the director of rugby and players involved in it?

Int5: I would say that, to an extent. Umm, I think [REDACTED], even to this day, it gets mentioned, doesn't it? When it comes to him, he's still frequently mentioned as in the future, he's doing so well at [REDACTED], about the possibility of him being an [REDACTED] coach and he often bats it down himself when you speak about it with him in an interview, umm. But he can't get rid of that at any point, and when that story is mentioned who mentions the [REDACTED] now? No-one. It all comes back to [REDACTED] being the man who orchestrated it. Is that technically correct? We don't know. We don't know what goes on behind the scenes, but because he's the one in the public eye, he's the one who gets it.

TB: Yeah, I mean, on that particular story, that issue, there were claims it was just the tip of the iceberg, as it were, and they weren't the only club that had done it, and was that – it sounds like you obviously covered the story there – was that something that you pursued, looked into? Again, the idea of where do you... obviously there's a time and a place to be an investigative reporter and there's a time too to kind of be wary of maybe avoiding dead ends and things, and I just wonder...

Int5: ... I'm not an investigative reporter is the first thing to say, umm, and that also means I'm not paid enough money to go and dig those stories, and if you want to dig those stories out you've got to have time to be able to do it. That's not to say that I haven't been in situations, and I'm sure any [REDACTED] journalist who's been around players before and (they've) said "Oh yeah, so-and-so used to do that all the time," or "So-and-so used to do this," and "So-and-so used to do that." But as soon as a microphone's put under their face they'd be like "Well I never heard what went on. It never happened when I was involved. I heard about it but I was never involved." And sort of so many senior, big names in the game all of sudden knew nothing about it because it had never happened to them, whereas behind closed doors everyone's like, "Yeah, it was going on everywhere." So that's very difficult to report as a journalist. You have to say that – you know, why is it so many of these senior players know nothing about something that is apparently so prolific?

TB: Yeah, and is that something then that you've thought about, maybe that fact that clearly as a sports journalist – or as journalists generally – there's an expectation from the public that they're there to report accurately and truthfully, but maybe sometimes we're aware like you've said that players may say one thing off the record as it were and another thing on the record, and there might be a disconnect really in the kind of...

Int5: Yeah, but isn't that the whole of journalism? You know, you are bound and, you know, you don't become a journalist without knowing the law of what you can and can't say,



umm, you know you're not a good journalist if you don't know what you can and can't do, and you can't force someone into saying something. Umm, we've just had a massive case with, you know, Cliff Richard that the BBC's not going to be fighting against for his invasion of privacy. That's, you know, further blurred lines and confused a lot of people. I know *The Sun* only came out yesterday saying how upset they were the BBC wasn't going to be pursuing the case and going for the appeal. Umm, you have to be very careful and perhaps maybe as a BBC journalist we are a little bit more cagey about those things, perhaps not in that one, that example I've just given. But for me in particular we do have the philosophy that we don't report something until we know it's true. Umm, and I know, I mean everybody makes mistakes, every media outlet will make mistakes along the way but, I mean, I do breakfast news and if we hear something being reported on another station we'll wait until it's confirmed. We can't do it, you know. It's just, we have a policy where you have to have it confirmed by two different sources, so if something drops down on your news wires in the morning, umm, unless it's confirmed by two different sources we can't report it. Err, so if other news outlets want to do it that's absolutely fine but it's just how we operate – you can't do it.

TB: So another question. Do you think a sports journalist has duties and if so to whom do they owe those duties?

Int5: Umm. **Your duty is to report the news of sport. Who's interested in the news of sport? I'd always argue everyone.** I don't like the thought that I'm only giving the news of sport to sports fans. I think that's where a lot of people go wrong when it comes to sports journalism. It's a frustration of mine that you're only reporting to people in the know. Sports is for everyone, everyone can be interested in it for different reasons. Umm, so yeah, **you're reporting on it for everyone.**

TB: So a duty owed to the public then?

Int5: Yeah. There's no reason why, why would you try and exclude anyone from your reporting? You should always try and make a story as relevant as possible to the biggest, widest audience possible. Okay, yeah, if you're writing for a specific publication and they have a target they want you to work towards by all means do that, but as a general rule whenever I do any kind of work I try and make sure I don't leave anyone behind.

TB: Do you feel you have any sense of **duty to the people you're reporting on**, reporting about?

Int5: Of course. Umm, **you have to make sure that you are looking after them.** Umm, they've obviously put themselves forward. It's widely known that at the BBC we don't pay people for interviews, umm, therefore they're there on their goodwill. They could be there in front of you for a number of reasons. It could be that they're there as a sportsperson to maybe promote their club, organisation, an upcoming event. It could be that they're there to defend themselves from something, it could be that they're there to speak about a different issue. Therefore, there's so many different reasons why there's a person in front of you, I mean, you have to look after them. On that note, I can give you an example, of recently I did an interview with a coach who was a head coach of a national team after a major event, and

I had been told the name of a player who had been in a car crash before that major event began. And I specifically had not spoken to that national coach throughout the whole event about that, because we were told the player involved was very upset about what happened, they were having mental issues and flashbacks about what had happened, erm, they didn't want to talk about it and they didn't want it out in the media. And I'd been told about it, I knew who it was. Umm, also for medical reasons, if someone's had an impact from a car crash, umm, you're a bit sort of like, well, I'm not going to cross that line, I've got no reason. Does it add to the story? Yeah, it's a massive story. But I've got an individual to look after that I'm reporting on their event and what that's going to impact on them long term. So I made an agreement that I wouldn't talk about that, and I was fine with that. What was interesting was that at the end of the event I asked the national coach, err, how he felt about his position and his job going forward because of how his team had performed, and he brought up voluntarily the troubles they'd had in the build up to that event and mentioned a player being in a car crash. And I was like, hang on. I've been told not to mention it throughout this whole tournament and then he starts spilling his guts to me in this last interview. So I said to him, I said in my last question, "You've just told me the player was in a car crash in the build-up to this event, can you please give us any more detail about what happened?" To which he then shut down and realised he's made a mistake. And so what we did was stop the interview there and I spoke about it, I said, "Look, I wouldn't have brought that up but you mentioned it." And he said, "I'm really sorry, I shouldn't have mentioned it, can we scrap the last question?" And I said, "Fine." So what we did was we made an agreement, I was doing it for TV and radio at the time, it wasn't live. We just chopped off the last question. I had a duty to him because he shouldn't have mentioned it, and ultimately to the player who, as I said, has had issues. And it's a, you know, medically sensitive issue. So, yeah, you, you, it doesn't matter who you're speaking to, you've got to look after them.

TB: So obviously there's an element of sensitivity there as well as chasing a big story.

Int5: Yeah.

TB: So, in connection with that, what do you think maybe are the most important ethical qualities that a sports journalist should display, should show in the course of their work?

Int5: Say that again. Most...?

TB: Well, most important ethical qualities that a sports journalist should, should show in their work or underpin their work. I mean you're obviously talking there about an element of compassion I suppose. But...

Int5: ... Yeah, reporting the truth is the first thing. I find it very interesting, err, particularly in rugby union circles, err, some of the reporting that goes on around players when it comes to things like wages in particular, that I read sometimes what the reports are of what some players are being paid and I know how journalists get those stories – they get them from agents and the agent wants the story out there because they want to further promote their player and say they're some, you know, Billy big dog in this world and they're getting paid the biggest amount of money you've ever seen for, you know, whatever the reason,

whether it be an international or whatever. And, umm, a lot of the time it's rubbish, the amounts that are quoted. And, umm, it's because it's badly written. It might be that an agent has said, "Oh yeah, this guy, he's signed for this club and he's signed for this amount of money." And it's not that he's signed for that amount of money at all. It might be that he's signed for that amount of money over a three-year deal and part of that is included is a car and maybe a moving allowance and so on and so forth. And they've just bundled all those, say, five figures together and said so-and-so's getting paid this much. It's terrible journalism. They're not getting paid that much at all. It's not, you know, a salary is a salary. But I do find that, in particular in rugby journalism, frustrating because I'm just like, it over-inflates the market as well in rugby union. It's poor reporting. It makes other players think they're not getting paid enough money. I find it really poor. And you have to be honest.

TB: And do you think those misrepresentations are deliberate misrepresentations? Do you think in many cases the reporters know that...

Int5: ... Yeah. It's clickbait. You know, if you saw a story that said, erm, "Joe Bloggs is the highest paid rugby player in the world" with the amount next to it, you'd read that wouldn't you?

TB: Yeah I probably would to keep across what's going on.

Int5: But what if it wasn't right? I don't need to interview you, but you know what I mean.

TB: No, no, no, absolutely. Umm, it's interesting, when you were talking there you were mentioning rugby journalism, and more often than not it's football that has the microscope held over it in terms of the reporting around figures and transfers and agents playing a manipulative role in the media agenda. So, is it the case then maybe, I don't know, are some rugby journalists just aping football journalists in that regard. Is it...

Int5: ... I think it's copying isn't it...

TB: ... fast and loose?

Int5: It's not fast and loose. It's a desperation to get the exclusive. And there is no two ways about it, I find journalism in general to be very male, testosterone-led about who gets the biggest exclusive. It's never who's the most accurate. It's who gets it first. That's all generally that is cared about. Umm, I'd say some of the better journalism is sometimes some of the more soft, sensitive stories that people take time over that might not get the biggest headlines. Umm, but yeah. And it's the whole thing as I said, say you're writing the story about the guy who's got the biggest amount of money. It's not perhaps that you've got the story totally wrong, it's just that you've manipulated it so it's not quite accurate. So it's kind of half there. No one's going to complain about it because, you know, who's going to take you to a court of law over that? Who deep down really cares? You know, the player involved is probably thinking well everyone thinks I'm amazing now so that's fantastic, the agent thinks it's brilliant – everyone thinks I've done a brilliant job for that player, I'm going to get more people out of it. The only people probably really annoyed about a situation like that would be a club who are turning around going, "We are not paying that kind of money.

We don't have that kind of money." But again they're just sort of like, "Well, they'll write whatever that want, won't they?"

TB: I mean, yeah, I have had – in my own experience – an instance like that where it was prior to a player actually signing for a club, umm, and I said a player was about to be signed by the club and I didn't mention any figures in terms of salary, but what annoyed the club – and obviously the player wasn't annoyed and his agent wasn't annoyed – but what annoyed the club was the fact that it basically inflated the player's price because he was under the radar in terms of being a free agent, but now other clubs were alerted to it.

Int5: Exactly.

TB: "You've chucked on ten per cent"...

Int5: It's the clubs that get annoyed. To the agents and the players, it means nothing to them, unless perhaps the club's trying to off-load them in some way, but...

TB: My next question was going to be about where do you think sports journalists get their professional values from? I mean, you touched on it a little bit there when you were talking about how sometimes it's maybe a kind of competitive, testosterone-fuelled as you said to sort of attempt to be ahead of the pack; to get one over your peers in a way. So, you might say that that kind of competitive edge is something that's required for, what, maybe operating in that media pack?

Int5: I think it's habit. Umm, easy examples of it would be if you ever go to a mix zone at the end of like a Champions League match, err, and say you're a TV reporter and you've got a little gaggle next to you of like the Sundays or the next day press. If they think your camera is anywhere near a player they're speaking to they will elbow you, push you, they'll happily turn the camera away, hold their notebooks up in front of the camera, and it's a mix room – there are no rules in a mix zone. You can politely say, "Would everyone be happy if we just got this one player for tomorrow?" Not an issue – one player. But can they do that to four? Five? You know, at what point does, you know. They are sort of laws unto themselves mixed zones but that's just a really easy example of how protective they will be, and it does tend to the journalists and reporters who've been in the game a bit longer who can be a little more mean about it at times. Umm, but I tend to find, you know, if you're in a smaller group of journalists everyone tends to work together quite well. Everyone'll say, "We'd like to save that for tomorrow, does anyone have an issue with that?" I had a few of them at the Rugby World Cup where you'd be at a presser and then players would be put up – not with England but with like Australia or something, there'd be like ten of us in the room. They'd turn around they'd go, "Right, that was a really good line." They'd say to me – so I was reporting for 5live – they'd be like, "Do you mind if we hold that one line for tomorrow morning and then you can run that thing right now?" I'd be like, "Yeah, fine, not an issue. As long as there's something I can run now, I can hold that until tomorrow." Not an issue, as long as it's not, you know, the most salacious, brilliant line of the day that everyone's desperate to get out there straight away. Fine.

TB: So there's almost a twin thing operating isn't there perhaps, about sometimes working collectively as a pack but then also trying at times to get one over that very same members of the pack. Is there a...

Int5: ... From my point of view, I've never looked at trying to get one over people. You know, everyone behaves differently, and all journalists behave differently. I find journalists who are over-competitive to the point of rudeness odd. I don't think you'd get anywhere, especially in this day and age we live in of immediacy media. Good example, err, just this week I was at Heathrow for the arrival of the British athletics team. Dina Asher-Smith, we're all waiting for her. There are four camera crews – two from ITN, one from Sky and me from the BBC. There's two exit doors, one on either side. So, ITN have got two crews so they put one either side and then me and Sky are in the middle. I walk up and down the line, umm, 'cos I've got the last email from the agent. I say, "Just so you know, I've been told they're going to come from that side and she's going to come out and she's going to do an interview for each of us. Straight away, ITN barge all their way down to that end, as soon as I've given them the information, not themselves. They take up the two prime spots, they put their elbows out and they ask us to wait behind. And I'm just sort of like, I could fight this, what is the point? Umm, I just find the whole thing crazy and I'll be honest it's not organisations, because I'm not saying this is always ITN, it's individuals, it really is. It's not, anyone who says "So-and-so, that organisation, they're all terrible." No they're not, you know, it's people who are worried and perhaps they're nervous about their position and getting it first or what their editor says to them when they get back. I just have the attitude of, when is my deadline, am I going to get an interview in time? Yeah, there are times when I'll say, "Do you mind if I go first?" depending on what situation I'm in. And you negotiate. Some of it is just unnecessary.

TB: What about the role then of editors, an editor in maybe setting the environment and setting the values that you then operate under? Do they have a significant impact?

Int5: Umm, this is where there's two things. I deal with my editor at [REDACTED] all the time and, err, deal with him or her all the time and they will push for certain things but when it comes to necessarily, err, a local news environment, you know, someone turns around and says, "[REDACTED], we really need to get David Beckham on this issue, I'll be like, "Yeah, I'll put a call into his agent right now." Just thinking, it's never going to happen. It's all about, you know, expectation and your position in the pecking order, you know. I think I've interviewed David Beckham once in 15 years. Err, but, you know, while as on a national level you tend to only hear from an editor if you've done something wrong. There's a lot of trust there, that I really value. Umm, and there will be, editors these days I tend to find the way they operate is a line of questioning. They don't tell you what to do, they go, "So how are you going to approach this?" You know, it's a real management tool sadly where they'll ask you three or four questions and if they're happy they'll leave you alone. Whereas if you do something wrong they're quite quick to tell you, so I'm lucky I don't go too many of those phone calls.

TB: Does the, do the BBC Guidelines or other codes of practice have a significant bearing on the way you work? How large do they loom?

Int5: Umm, they're written on my badge, if you ever forget. They are always there. If you've got one, have a read of the back – so they are always there. We are reminded of them on a reasonably regular basis. Umm, yeah, I mean, as I said, it comes back to that slight thing as I said to you, there's that competitive edge that I will only use if I find it necessary and required to get something that I think is urgent into the public domain as quickly as possible. You have to pick your battles, you know. And as I said we live in a day and age where, you know, is it really worth fighting to be the first person to get a football press conference out there into the ether when there are 24 cameras with you in the room all at the same time? No, I'd rather be there, think about it, actually put something together that's slightly more considered and maybe add a bit more value. Will it appeal to a wider audience? Umm, than just pushing material out there. No point.

TB: So just to develop that then, it's often emphasised these days that it's sort of an instant, 24/7 news culture. There is arguably an appetite for stuff to be put out there immediately and consumed immediately. But do you think in a way to create a point of difference now as a sports journalist you need to almost step away from that, from that sort of rat race, as it were, of kind of trying to be first over the line with the content and do something a little bit more – as you said, a little bit more thoughtful.

Int5: Yeah, if you've got the time. That's the biggest thing, you know.

TB: Do you have the time?

Int5: No. I've a small child and a husband [laughs]. So, yeah, you know, I think that's every journalist's dream, isn't it? To be given time off rota to actually go and do the day-to-day. I mean, that's another thing that's a big difference maybe if you are and how you operate – I work in a news organisation that produces content every single day and I can be on any story any single day. Umm, I'm not necessarily always given time to go and produce original journalism. I'd love to be able to do that. I don't think there's a journalist on the planet who wouldn't like more time to actually go and properly investigate things. I'm sure – I can't think of anyone who doesn't have something, "Ahh, I'd love to go and spend some time on that, looking into that." You know, I always think about, which newspaper was it that broke the scandal about the girls, that was turned into the BBC documentary about the paedophile ring? Up in Rochdale.

TB: Oh, *The Times*.

Int5: Was it *The Times*?

TB: Yeah, Andrew Norfolk.

Int5: Because wasn't he given like a year off to...

TB: ... Yeah, a lot of time to work on it.

Int5: Exactly. But that's what you get when you're given that time. You can actually put something really considered together, you can evidence, and I just think that kind of

journalism's incredible, but you've got to be given time and have an editor who understands that. Umm, so, yeah, I'm not given that at the moment.

TB: A slightly different tack now. There has been – or is – at least in online circles a pressure to get a certain number of eyeballs on stories and for unique visitor figures to continue to grow and grow and grow, and I wonder just in terms of expectations about audience figures and things, how do you think that's affected the content of sports journalism? Maybe in terms of quality and quantity.

Int5: Umm. I find it interesting, actually. If we go and film something for the BBC now, for TV, umm, we are encouraged if we have time – if it's not necessarily breaking news – if we have time to go and speak to our digital team before we go. Because what will happen when we produce a story if it is deemed that it would do well on say Facebook or digital platforms we go and speak to them about if there's anything extra they would need to put a slightly different spin on the story. It might be that they want something shot from a different angle, it might be that they want a longer shot of certain things. Normally if you're filming something you'd hold something for about ten seconds then you'd move onto the next thing, and they'd be like, no, can you hold it for 30 seconds and we can do something with it. So, yeah, there is a difference there and it's, you know, as we keep hearing particularly in the last week, young people in particular are consuming sport in a very different way. Umm, and that needs to be considered with everything that you're doing now. If you want young people to, you know, pay attention to it – you know, I read *The Times* app on my phone every day but they might not necessarily. They might get everything they want through Facebook and pick and choose what they want. You know, it's things that are slightly more interactive that they are interested in. They're not interested in reading, you know, a 500-word long article or watching, God, I doubt any of them watch regional news.

TB: So there's almost an element of, you know, the broadcasting – you don't go out now just to get the package for broadcast, you're thinking too about what the digital desk want...

Int5: ... Yeah...

TB: ... and the different shots they'd need. So does that have a, is that just the evolution of journalism in the light of technology?

Int5: Yeah. You know, go back, what, when I was just starting out, even little things, like, you think "Oh, I don't have time to do that," well, you do, because when I first started in radio you used to splice tape before minidisks actually first came in. Umm, I was around that age where splicing was just on its way out as minidisks started. So, err, in that respect if you think about how much time we've saved just by being able to press a button and go, umm, we do have time to do these things. I think there's a wonderful thing in any day and age and job and profession that we all think that we don't have enough time; it's just a different way of doing things and no-one likes change. But change is just happening so quickly now, you know, you have to keep up or get left behind.



TB: So, the rise of social media – you mentioned that maybe in reference to attracting and retaining a younger audience. But can you think of any instances, from your experience, where social media has posed maybe an ethical issue for you which maybe wouldn't have been there before social media arrived?

Int5: I don't know what you want.

TB: What I mean is, maybe social media enables, you know, a more interactive engagement with the audience which in some instances can probably help journalism generally as well as sports journalism in terms of crowd sourcing material or a story evolving with user-generated input. But also it can have downsides too in terms of...

Int5: ... Well, in particular in the last year we've had a big push here at the BBC to understand what we can and can't use from user-generated content. Umm, there's certain things, like, say there is a major event and there's loads of pictures of that event, say that a bomb went off out here and you and I start filming it on our phones and, err, we film it and put it up on social media and we get a message from the BBC that says "Hi Tom, are you alright if I use this on the BBC" and you reply and you say, "Yeah." What have you actually just said "yes" to? You've essentially, if you've just said "yes", you've said it can be used on BBC News, it can be used on local news, it can be used on BBC World, it can be used on the BBC website, it can be used on BBC Facebook. Is that really what you were happy for it to be used on, is the first thing. So you've actually got, when we ask the question of people can we use stuff it's actually, "Are you happy for this to be used by all BBC outlets?" is the correct question. Umm, if someone is a contributor again we are encouraged to get some kind of consent that they are happy to be a contributor. Umm, and just sourcing things off the net. If someone says, "No, don't use it." I had one at... Do you remember, there was quite a bit of trouble at a couple of horse racing meetings recently in the last year. I went up to Ascot this year because they'd put in loads of extra security measures. We wanted to use some of the brawling pictures that had been happening at previous events. They weren't our content, I spent the whole day chasing this one guy on social media to use, and about an hour before we went to air – I'd put together a package without his stuff anyway – he got back to me and said "Under no circumstances use this footage." Now, if someone was a slightly more lax journalist they'd have gone, "Pictures are in the system, we'll use them." No. We check. We check everything. And we do actually have a traffic coding system at the BBC for content that's in our system, even if it's been used before and someone's given consent for it to be used before that doesn't mean they've agreed for it to be used again, and we have to update that. So, if something's red you either can't use it or you need to check if you can use it. If it's yellow it might mean there's an agreement saying "Ok, you can use it but you'll have to pay 50 quid every time you use it." If it's green it's our own content, go crazy.

TB: So that sounds very comprehensive then in terms of a regime by which you determine what social media content you can use. Okay.

Int5: We do a lot of courses here.



TB: Well in all seriousness we mentioned earlier about where you get your professional values from as a sports journalist or as a journalist. I suppose with the BBC, I suppose it does have this reputation for thoroughness and even-handedness?

Int5: You have to, you've got no choice. You're funded by the licence fee. People – whether it's right or wrong – put you on a higher pedestal than other media outlets. A lot of people will say sometimes the BBC are slower to stories than other people. Yeah, sometimes we are slow but that's because sometimes we're just making sure it's true. I love the story about Sky killing the Queen Mother about 15 years before she actually died. Umm, I'd like to think that wouldn't happen here. The closest the BBC came to anything like that was I think in the last few years a BBC journalist tweeted that the Queen had died because he was watching a screen where an obit was being played out. He got in a lot of trouble for that. Umm, and that was just a tweet. But even then, because he's a BBC journalists, it doesn't matter it says "My thoughts not those of the BBC." What were you thinking? Would you not check that out before you... You know, you have a responsibility.

TB: Do you think it's fair that you're held to a higher standard?

Int5: Course.

TB: Because you're publicly funded?

Int5: Yeah, definitely. Five hundred per cent. Definitely.

TB: You mentioned clickbait earlier. Do you think, in sports journalism do you think it's an issue and if so to what extent?

Int5: Yeah. I don't think sport is any different to any other genre of news when it comes to clickbait. You know, what is the difference between sport – it's just another headline topic or subject line. It's irrelevant. Everyone wants more people to go to their site and click on more things. Everyone does it in different ways. I don't really know what else to say other than that to be honest. You know, it's the same as anywhere.

TB: You described in some detail the kind of monitoring of potential user-generated content and whether you can use it; it sounded very thorough. With social media more generally how have issues of verification and fact-checking – bearing in mind fake news and things – how much more to the fore have those things become?

Int5: Well we have to do it. You know, we don't, and we talk about it all the time, this is a regular conversation that goes on, umm. I don't know how else to say it, you know, we don't go, we will go and look for people online: we will use Facebook, we'll use Twitter. But if you find someone and they've got something you want, unless you ask for permission you can't use it. It's that simple. The one that's interesting at the moment is YouTube, about if a person has published something publicly on YouTube, is that fair game to be used? Because they still own it. So even if you've given it a credit and they've published it in a public place can you use it? That's a big question and sometimes it depends on what the content is and we're very lucky at the BBC, we have lawyers. We have a duty lawyer every single day who

is available 24/7. We call, we ask. We're lucky. I appreciate maybe some media outlets don't have that. But if you've got all those tools at your disposal and you should know what you're doing, how can you get it wrong?

TB: So quite a blunt question here. Have you ever encountered behaviour in the course of your practice as a sports journalist that you've regarded as being either illegal or seriously breached ethical codes of conduct. And if it's not from your own personal experience then are you aware of anybody having perpetrated such things?

Int5: No. I can't think of anything. Give me an example.

TB: Umm, maybe, we spoke earlier about the kind of content that sometimes straddles news and sport, so maybe a trial where a journalist has effectively committed contempt of court by producing content..

Int5: ...No nothing like that, sorry.

TB: No need to apologise.

Int5: I know, but you need something good, don't you? [Laughs] You'll get one eventually.

TB: Well this is it, you see. Speaking to, when you're interviewing journalists we all think in a certain way, you know, as you say, you're kind of – there is that element of holding out for a top line.

Int5: Yeah, sorry.

TB: No, it's all about being honest.

Int5: Yeah.

TB: That's fine. A question now about, and we touched on it earlier, about when we were thinking about stuff that you might be aware of but which you don't publish, for a variety of reasons. It could be welfare of individuals or something else. To what extent do you think, have you maybe kind of self-censored in the sense of kind of not having published or broadcast material that you know to be true and which arguably might be in the public interest but for whatever reason you've held off from broadcast?

Int5: There's nothing sort of that I would say is, err, anything contentious. There have been stories, for instance when I worked in team sports when I've been well aware that either two players in the same team or two players from opposite teams have been in a relationship and whether that would be a good story to add to an upcoming match or event. Umm, and I've had a word with a press officer to say "Look, I know they're in a relationship. Can we talk about that?" And they've just said "No." And that's their privacy. So it might be that they want to talk to me about it and actually it's a good story and it's something they want to talk about. Only the other day I spoke to the England men's hockey captain because he was at the Hockey World Cup and his wife plays in the England women's hockey team. So

I said to him “Obviously you’re here to support your wife, can we talk about your relationship?” He was like, “Yeah, course.” Obviously there’s a line that we’re talking about. We’re talking about hockey. Umm, but yeah, he was happy to talk about that, which is great. Whereas I’ve spoken to other players before, umm, where, yeah, we’re not talking about that. Don’t want it in the public media, don’t want it in the public arena at all. And I’ve got no interest to put it out there. Umm, and it’s slightly sensitive as well around areas if it’s the same sex couple, because you might be outing them, and again I have no interest in doing that. That’s their private life. What right do I have to tell people that someone is or isn’t gay if they do or don’t it out there? So I wouldn’t do that.

TB: You mentioned there about maybe how in the first instance asking a press officer “Could I ask this question?” and them obviously shutting it down immediately...

Int5: ... It depends on your relationship with the press officer.

TB: Yeah, but what kind of influence do you think – as gatekeepers, as it were – that press officers have in sort of controlling information? Is it a significant factor?

Int5: I think it depends on the organisation, doesn’t it? Some are just there to follow the rules. Others are allowed to use their common sense. Umm, I think you get a variety of different press officers. It depends on how long they’ve been in the game, what their actual role is, if they have any influence. You go to, you know, certain places, the press officer is just there to say “No” essentially [laughs], I’m sure we’ve all been there. Umm, while you go to other places and if you know them and you’ve built up a relationship with them and you haven’t pissed them off in the past, which is another big thing, they’ll listen to you, you know. And it might be that it’s in their interest, maybe not on that day maybe, but maybe – “Ok, that thing we spoke about – let’s do it with you.” Because they trust you.

TB: Have you noticed any change in behaviour by press officers as in-house media content by clubs and governing bodies becomes more sophisticated, and they maybe want to break their own stories...

Int5: ... Yeah, they basically say “no” more often. And they are, you know, they’re not answerable to us they’re answerable to their bosses. So, yeah, you can see a shift change. I find it really interesting, umm, maybe more from a BBC perspective, about the order a press team will decide, if they’ve got something big happening, who speaks to whom when. They’ll do their own content first and they might have already done it behind closed doors before you even get to them, because that means they can put it out in their own words in their own way, you know. And, like, when football clubs sometimes get a big signing now you won’t get the player but you’ll be told, “You can watch an exclusive interview with so-and-so on Arsenal TV or Chelsea TV,” and they’ll send you the clip. Now, us as the BBC, if we’re sent something by Arsenal TV that’s not our journalism. We weren’t in the room. We don’t know if that person is actually happy or sad about what they’re doing, you know. That’s where we are very uncomfortable and as a general rule we would never use that. We might use said player if they’re holding up a scarf or a shirt, but an interview that wasn’t done by us? No. The only time you would ever consider something like that if it is, say, so-and-so coming out and saying “I’m going to retire,” and then even then we’d probably

report: "So-and-so has said they're retiring – we've got the interview, we didn't do it." I'd refer that to someone else. How badly do we want it? Again, we weren't in the room. I recently had, err – who did I interview the other week? – it was the biggest name in [REDACTED]...

TB: [REDACTED]?

Int5: No, not [REDACTED]. He's not playing any more.

TB: [REDACTED]?

Int5: Thank you! So, I get told I get an interview with [REDACTED]. Brilliant. He's going to launch an academy at [REDACTED]. Brilliant, great. "Only doing five interviews, you've got one of them, [REDACTED]." Brilliant, great. Then they said, "You can only ask these five questions." Not doing it. It's that simple. Umm, you ring the press officer and you just go, "I'm sorry, I'm not going to agree to that." Apparently, in [REDACTED] that's what [REDACTED] does. He is big enough there that he can say, "Yes you'll get an interview and this is what you're going to ask me." With the British press, we don't do that, and he said, when I'd rung the press officer and said I'm not going to agree to that, I said, "Look, I'm not going to ask him about [REDACTED] politics, that's not why I'm at the event, but I can't agree to those five questions. What I ask him might be along those guidelines anyway, but, you know, you can't be restricted like that in British journalism or it all falls down." Umm, and he said interestingly enough every other journalist who he had sent the same email to about the five questions had all come back and said the same thing. So I think in that respect it's very good.

TB: Ok. And that's just a resistance to a challenge to your independence, and trying to be censored by...

Int5: ... Yes, definitely. It's important.

TB: Sports journalists have had various disparaging ways of being described – "fans with typewriters" or belonging to the toy department of the news organisation. Do you think any of that's fair at all?

Int5: Again, I think that depends on who it is. I, I think it's actually something you gain with years as a journalist, umm, I think when we all start in sports journalism we're all a little bit starry-eyed and excited. Umm, I think it takes a while to understand your responsibility and I think that's why you should, you know, work your way up slowly, grow up while you're there. Sometimes, you know, when you sit in a press conference and someone walks in and there's a round of applause and you're, "What's going on here?" You know, we're not there to be cheerleaders for the sport, we're there to report on it honestly. We're there to represent and make sure the fans who pay money, go week in, week out, are giving their money or know what they're giving their money towards. Umm, yeah.

TB: Do you think sports journalists – we spoke about time earlier, wouldn't it be great to have a month to go off-diary – but do you think as a general rule sports journalists maybe

spend too much time maybe on that treadmill of press conference and match and post-match...

Int5: ... Yeah, well I do...

TB: ... Without maybe digging around on other stuff?

Int5: Yeah, but that depends on your organisation and what they want from you. If they want more of the other stuff they've got to give you time to do it, so it's that simple. You know, it depends what your job role is. I'd love to spend more time actually looking at real, original journalism but, no, don't get the time to do it.

TB: Is that frustrating personally?

Int5: Yeah, hugely. I'd love to have more time to do actual, real stuff. Ummm, yeah.

TB: So within the system then are the bigger issues, the harder news stories around sport, being neglected then if there's that kind of set up where there's that daily demand for news and we are on the merry go round of press conference and game and press conference?

Int5: Yes, but there are people out there who are doing it. I think, who was it, David Walsh in *The Times* with Lance Armstrong. You know, there's just evidence of a man who knew, never gave up, and finally got his reward. I don't know how much time he was given for that, umm, but, you know, these stories do come out in the wash eventually and there are people who are watching closely. Am I watching closely right now? No. I've read you a breakfast bulletin at 6.28 this morning and I think I've got to do a live at tomorrow, it's not even sport. So [laughs], yeah.

TB: So the demands basically of day-to-day stuff are just...

Int5: ... Standard. I'm not even being a sports journalist tomorrow because they're short on the news desk, so – you're there to produce output.

TB: Which takes me to my next question, leaning more towards questions of identity now. So, that sounds quite fluid in a way, you're predominantly a sports journalist but called in to news. You mentioned earlier about speaking to the digital desk before you go out on certain stories to talk about whether they need certain shots. So do you think, particularly now in the digital age, do you have a shifting sense of what it is to be a sports journalist? Do you think that is evolving?

Int5: I think anyone who is a sports journalist, and you'll probably know this, is if you say went into any major press conference I find there is a real big difference in the people there. You can almost sort of like put them in brackets. You've got an older generation of journalists – they tend to be editors at television stations or they are senior correspondents on newspapers and they all huddle together in a corner, umm, and they carry a lot more weight and they probably have a little bit more time to think about what they're doing. You then have sort of the medium group – people who have got to be live the second this story

is out, err, they've got to produce copy, they've got to file the shots, they've got to send it back. They're content producers. And then you've got this other weird little – not weird, don't use that word – this other evolving group of the sort of, like, blogging generation who are probably sending it out live the whole time and they're commenting on it at the same time, err, putting little messages out and the love hearts on it of stuff they like, umm, and feeding that audience who just want it immediate. They don't care that it's not considered, they don't care that it's not thought about, they just want something that is immediate and, you know, has an emoji on it that they can relate to. Umm, and those are the sort of three levels I tend to find that you're finding of journalism. At the moment I'm in the middle, I'd like to get to the top bit where I can do slightly more considered stuff and have time to think about it but I'm not there.

TB: So that third group you refer to then, is it the case that – I mean, how do they, do they inform the way you approach stories now. The fact that you know there's a group of people who are doing things, as you say, live texting effectively...

Int5: ... They definitely inform. I worry more about that generation coming through how much they know legally about what they're doing, is my biggest concern. I don't know any set examples in sport, the big example being about, you know, was it a vlogger who put up the image of the suicide victims is a perfect example of someone being a bit naïve about what you can, can't, should and shouldn't be doing, umm, and having that sort of slightly more train of considered thought. Umm, and that's my question about the generation of journalists coming through is – yes there is a place for immediacy and that's what the generation coming through want, they want things quickly and they want it fun, and they want it instantaneously. But there has to always be a space for considered thought because if not, you know, you're not actually going to get any actual news.

TB: Yeah. So, could you summarise how maybe, if we were to take sort of a decade ago and look at what you're doing now, how the kind of role has changed?

Int5: Yeah. I've been doing this for, what, 15 years. So when I started Facebook existed but it was not a tool for news. It was a tool for sharing pictures with your friends, that was it, and you probably had about 30 friends unless you wanted to be friends with a load of people from America you didn't know. Umm, didn't have Twitter and you would, you know, quite happily go out to a story. So I used to work down at [REDACTED], I'd be sent out to a press conference where I would go and I would film it – not film out – do it on my mini-disc player for radio, get the interview with the manager, I'd come back, ingest it into the system and we'd probably hold onto it for a day and play it out the next day before the match. That was fine. Now, you go, you get your interview with the manager, whilst you're there on your laptop you ingest it, you send it into the BBC system, you write the link and the cue and it goes out within the hour. That's the difference. Umm, it's very rare you hold onto any material now, unless you've got an exclusive. But, yeah, that, that pressure to produce things quicker and faster and endlessly feed the news machine is very different.

TB: Yeah, thank you. That tempo at which things tick over now, does it make you feel like you're – sometimes the question arises about whether journalism is a profession or a trade.

When things are happening as remorselessly as that do you feel like you're on a bit of a treadmill and you're operating more in a trade, as it were, rather than that more reflective, considered attitude that might be more like a profession I suppose?

Int5: I think you know before you walk into a job what it's going to be like. You're going to a big press conference where they're going to unveil a team or something like that, you know what the gig is before you turn up. Umm, the trick is to keep listening and it's people who aren't listening who might not pick up on that little nugget – “Did he just say that?” And who's going to follow up on that? Did someone follow up on it? You've got to be listening the whole time. I mean, yeah, it is a bit of a treadmill at times but I'm not going to complain about it, I like being on that treadmill – it's not a bad place to be.

TB: Yeah, yeah, so just a couple of questions remaining now. In today's environment do you think the distinction between sports journalism and sports PR is a firm one, or do you think it's becoming blurred?

Int5: Good question.

TB: I mean, I was interested earlier when you said “Look, we're not going to accept these video interviews you're providing” because, you know, other organisations probably would and are you spilling into churning out sports PR arguably.

Int5: Err, ok. Churning out sports PR. Here's a good one. Gareth Southgate. They renamed Southgate station “Gareth Southgate” station for 72 hours at the end of the World Cup. It was done by Transport for London and VISA. Umm, everyone was going past taking pictures of it, they all loved it, it was a real water cooler moment as we would call it in the media, and we were “We've got to go and do it.” So they announce it the day before, so on the day we go down. They're going to have a flash mob of people wearing Gareth Southgate masks and they say they're going to have a Gareth Southgate impersonator there as well. The impersonator didn't turn up. The whole event is sponsored by VISA. So, how do we do that as the BBC? Umm, first thing is is the person from VISA [REDACTED] says, “You will get VISA in there somewhere, won't you?” because he knows [REDACTED] not going to put something on air where someone goes, “It's wonderful what VISA have done here today.” We just wouldn't output it, umm, and I don't think it ended up anywhere in the piece. It didn't need to. [REDACTED] That's not what the story's about, the story is about the renaming of the station and how, you know, the public of London loved that moment. It's a bit like when you, you know, get offered a sportsman now and you're told “Well you can only speak to them if you ask them a question about Winegums today.” You're like, fine, as long as it's not a live interview – that's where you get in a tricky situation. “Well, I'm delighted to say Winegums join me, you know, could help me be here today.” If you're doing a TV interview they put it as high up a collar as they can because they know you'll keep zooming in on the camera as tight on their face as possible, so you can get rid of it – at the BBC that's what we do. Newspapers can get away with it, they can write in their little nub right at the end a sentence: “Blah blah was speaking at the

Winegums event.” We, as the BBC, might let something incidentally fall into the background but we are purposely going to put something there. You can’t. It’s that simple.

TB: And finally, it’s quite an open, broad question, and it’s about what you think are the essential characteristics that a sports journalist should have in today’s digital environment if they’re going to fulfil their role effectively.

Int5: Well, it’s the same, I don’t see why it’s different to any other environment or any other job that you do. You should go and you should do it to the best of your ability, you should be honest, umm, and you should try and serve the public interest. Umm, I can say that as a BBC journalist because that’s what I’m there to report. Other media outlets might feel differently about the content they’re producing, but that’s what I produce every day. I’m not there to produce gossip, I’m there to produce stories that people need to hear, and that’s my attitude going to work every day.

TB: And those news values that you think you need to know about. You mentioned there about differentiating between gossip and public interest news, is that something you instinctively know... You’ve been a BBC journalist for some time, is that something that almost becomes, through habit, something that you understand what is serious news that needs to be done and stuff...

Int5: ... Yeah, you also, I can’t think of an example of a story that, you know, say, all the newspapers have run but we haven’t done at all. Umm, we might have done a story differently – sorry, I can’t think of an example off the top of my head. But, yeah, there are things we will and won’t say about things that maybe other people are happier reporting. We’re not the *Daily Mail* sidebar of shame. There’s a lot less of that content going out, but yeah.

TB: Great, thanks for your time.

*[Slight interlude as interview ends but then re-starts as interviewee makes clear she has a further point she wishes to make.]*

TB: So, I mentioned earlier about the ways in which maybe the rise of social media has affected relationships between journalists and their audience. In terms of interactions that you’ve had with the audience – people who’ve seen your work and commented on it – how’s that experience been?

Int5: The most obvious experience was when I’d done [redacted] as a woman. Umm, and a newspaper decided to write the story that I had been trolled online and people didn’t like what I had done, which I found a very interesting story because my experience [redacted] was an incredible amount of positivity, people who engaged who otherwise hadn’t been interested in the sport. You know, there were a couple of comments that people didn’t like it but it was nothing that I lost any sleep over. My bosses were really happy, my family were really happy – and they’re the only people who really count anyway – umm, and the people that I didn’t know that commented on it, I’d say 95 per cent of it was really positive. So I found it fascinating that a newspaper would



write up that I'd been trolled online. That to me is clickbait. It's really lazy journalism, umm, and interesting enough when it happened the head of BBC Sport approached and challenged the said reporter who apologised and then went back to the article rewrote it at the bottom – so no-one's read it at this point anyway – but then put in some of the positive comments that I got as well. But, you know, in the initial clickbait story – why put them in, why ruin a good story? That's poor and lazy journalism, umm, and not only that I don't respond to people online who comment on such things. What do you achieve by commenting back? You might end up in a dialogue with someone you don't want to have a dialogue with. It's pointless. So how do you use social media? I tend to use it to, err, if I'm at a press conference and something's happened I'll inform people. If I find something interesting in a sport that I'm working in I'll inform people. It might be directing them to a commentary that I'm doing that they might be interested in. People follow me as a general rule because of the sports I cover and they want to know where that content is. That's what I use social media for. I don't use it to have conversations with people.

TB: Was it a news journalist who wrote the...

Int5: ... Yes, and interestingly – if you want to know how lazy the journalism was – exactly the same story was published the year after. Same headline, same picture, different tweets. I mean, it was very amusing. The fact there were even less tweets the second time round as well. I was just, like, it's so poor. So, as I said, I wasn't trolled. But, you know, are we going to sue a newspaper over that?

TB: But you seem to be almost water off a duck's back in a way. Does it not depress you slightly that kind of, you know, another journalist will not only do it once but the following year, as you say, in a lazy...

Int5: ... Oh, they'll probably do it this year as well. Umm, you've got to pick your battles, you know. Have they turned round and said something personally abusive about me? No. Did they comment on something that actually happened? They would be able to argue, yes. They would say they have evidence of negative comments. Umm, but at the same time as I said, you know, what were the negative comments compared to positive comments? Did they do any journalism where they searched the whole of, all social media at the time to see how many were negative and how many were positive? No, course they didn't, they just picked up the best stuff that makes the best headline. It's lazy. It's fine, you've got to expect it though, especially if you are doing something like that. People are going to pick up on it. You know, look at what happened with all the women who were involved in the football World Cup over the summer. You know, loads of stuff was picked up about that. You know, some of it, you know, there's going to come a point where nobody cares. But you know we have social media now therefore everyone has an opinion and people are very brave on social media that they wouldn't be to your face. People are much nicer face-to-face than they are on social media and I think that's important for most people to remember: be as nice to people online as you were if you were sat down having a cup of coffee with them.

TB: Brilliant, thank you so much.

**Initial Distillation - Epsilon:**

- Thrown into sharp relief by the participant is the contrasting views expressed by professional sports people when the voice recorder is running and when it is not. The contrast is so sharp that it would seem fair to conclude that it is unavoidable that the sports journalist is in some way abetting the release of content that they know is not the honestly held view of the interviewee. The whole enterprise runs the risk of becoming a charade. On the topic of cheating, she says: "I'm sure any [REDACTED] journalist who's been around players before and (they've) said "Oh yeah, so-and-so used to do that all the time," or "So-and-so used to do this," and "So-and-so used to do that." But as soon as a microphone's put under their face they'd be like "Well I never heard what went on. It never happened when I was involved. I heard about it but I was never involved." And sort of so many senior, big names in the game all of a sudden knew nothing about it because it had never happened to them, whereas behind closed doors everyone's like, "Yeah, it was going on everywhere." So that's very difficult to report as a journalist. You have to say that – you know, why is it so many of these senior players know nothing about something that is apparently so prolific?" (p2).
- On the issue of a sports journalist's duties, the participant puts emphasis on the sports news being done for a universal audience, not a niche sports one. No other interviewee voiced this almost evangelical stance. "Your duty is to report the news of sport. Who's interested in the news of sport? I'd always argue everyone... you're reporting on it for everyone" (p3). The participant also voices a sense of obligation – a need to "look after" – the people she's reporting on. (This is in common with Interviewee 4, also a BBC employee.) "You have to make sure that you are looking after them" (p3). This duty can result in self-censorship – of not running content even when it is initially given on the record. "He (a national coach) brought up voluntarily the troubles they'd had in the build up to that event and mentioned a player being in a car crash. And I was like, hang on. I've been told not to mention it throughout this whole tournament and then he starts spilling his guts to me in this last interview. So I said to him, I said in my last question, "You've just told me the player was in a car crash in the build-up to this event, can you please give us any more detail about what happened?" To which he then shut down and realised he's made a mistake. And so what we did was stop the interview there and I spoke about it, I said, "Look, I wouldn't have brought that up but you mentioned it." And he said, "I'm really sorry, I shouldn't have mentioned it, can we scrap the last question?" And I said, "Fine." So what we did was we made an agreement, I was doing it for TV and radio at the time, it wasn't live. We just chopped off the last question. I had a duty to him because he shouldn't have mentioned it, and ultimately to the player who, as I said, has had issues. And it's a, you know, medically sensitive issue. So, yeah, you, you, it doesn't matter who you're speaking to, you've got to look after them" (p4).
- However, she asserts that "reporting the truth is the first thing" when it comes to naming essential ethical qualities that a sports journalist should have. This is in tension with the previous two bullet points. She asserts that sports journalists deliberately misrepresent – overstate – the salaries being offered to players in a bid to get hits. "Yeah. It's clickbait. You know, if you saw a story that said, erm, 'Joe Bloggs is the highest paid rugby player in the world' with the amount next to it, you'd read that wouldn't you?" (p5). Moreover, speed is placed over accuracy by the majority of sports journalists. "It's never who's the most accurate. It's who gets it first. That's all generally that is cared about" (p5).
- The participant expresses frustration at the obstruction and "mean" behaviour displayed by non-broadcast journalists to her when she is trying to gather post-match interviews, and also at the embargoing of interviews by certain journalists. "If they think your camera is anywhere near a player they're speaking to they will elbow you, push you, they'll happily turn the camera away, hold their notebooks up in front of the camera, and it's a mixed room – there are no rules in a mixed zone. You can politely say, "Would everyone be happy if we

just got this one player for tomorrow?” Not an issue – one player. But can they do that to four? Five? You know, at what point does, you know. They are sort of laws unto themselves mixed zones but that’s just a really easy example of how protective they will be, and it does tend to the journalists and reporters who’ve been in the game a bit longer who can be a little more mean about it at times” (p6). Later, she provides another example in which a newspaper made her the subject of a story – a story that she believes was clickbait and an exemplar of lazy journalism. “I’d done my first [redacted] as a woman. Umm, and a newspaper decided to write the story that I had been trolled online and people didn’t like what I had done, which I found a very interesting story because my experience of doing [redacted] was an incredible amount of positivity, people who engaged who otherwise hadn’t been interested in the sport. You know, there were a couple of comments that people didn’t like it but it was nothing that I lost any sleep over. My bosses were really happy, my family were really happy – and they’re the only people who really count anyway – umm, and the people that I didn’t know that commented on it, I’d say 95 per cent of it was really positive. So I found it fascinating that a newspaper would write up that I’d been trolled online. That to me is clickbait. It’s really lazy journalism, umm, and interesting enough when it happened the head of BBC Sport approached and challenged the said reporter who apologised and then went back to the article rewrote it at the bottom – so no-one’s read it at this point anyway – but then put in some of the positive comments that I got as well. But, you know, in the initial clickbait story – why put them in, why ruin a good story? That’s poor and lazy journalism... if you want to know how lazy the journalism was – exactly the same story was published the year after. Same headline, same picture, different tweets. I mean, it was very amusing. The fact there were even less tweets the second time round as well. I was just, like, it’s so poor. So, as I said, I wasn’t trolled” (p18-19).

- However, fellow broadcasters also behave poorly as they seek to capture better camera angles. Giving an example of when she was waiting for a prominent Team GB athlete to arrive at an airport, she describes her interactions with broadcasters from other outlets: “I say, ‘Just so you know, I’ve been told they’re going to come from that side and she’s going to come out and she’s going to do an interview for each of us.’ Straight away, ITN barge all their way down to that end, as soon as I’ve given them the information, not themselves. They take up the two prime spots, they put their elbows out and they ask us to wait behind. And I’m just sort of like, I could fight this, what is the point? Umm, I just find the whole thing crazy and I’ll be honest it’s not organisations, because I’m not saying this is always ITN, it’s individuals, it really is. It’s not, anyone who says ‘So-and-so, that organisation, they’re all terrible.’ No they’re not, you know, it’s people who are worried and perhaps they’re nervous about their position and getting it first or what their editor says to them when they get back” (p7).
- A certain wariness to expand on the importance of the BBC’s Editorial Guidelines comes through: “Umm, they’re written on my badge, if you ever forget. They are always there. If you’ve got one, have a read of the back – so they are always there. We are reminded of them on a reasonably regular basis. Umm, yeah, I mean...” (p7). Later on, however, she vigorously asserts her belief that the BBC should be held to a higher standard than other outlets due to the manner in which it is funded:

*TB: Do you think it’s fair that you’re held to a higher standard?*

*Int5: Course.*

*TB: Because you’re publicly funded?*

*Int5: Yeah, definitely. Five hundred per cent. Definitely. (p11)*

Later, the sense of public duty, aligned to the BBC's values, is forcefully stated. "You should be honest, umm, and you should try and serve the public interest. Umm, I can say that as a BBC journalist because that it what I'm there to report. Other media outlets might feel differently about the content they're producing, but that's what I produce every day. I'm not there to produce gossip, I'm there to produce stories that people need to hear, and that's my attitude going to work every day" (p18).

- Participant says she would dearly like to have more time to investigate stories, but that time is limited for "original journalism". "I'm not necessarily always given time to go and produce original journalism. I'd love to be able to do that. I don't think there's a journalist on the planet who wouldn't like more time to actually go and properly investigate things" (p8). Her frustrations at not being able to source original journalism surface again later on. "Yeah, hugely (frustrating). I'd love to have more time to do actual, real stuff... these stories do come out in the wash eventually and there are people who are watching closely. Am I watching closely right now? No. I've read you a breakfast bulletin at 6.28 this morning and I think I've got to do a live at [REDACTED] tomorrow, it's not even sport. So [laughs], yeah" (p15). However, the cycle of press calls and routine coverage is at times something she expresses a fondness for. "I mean, yeah, it is a bit of a treadmill at times but I'm not going to complain about it, I like being on that treadmill – it's not a bad place to be" (p17).
- The importance of gathering footage that is more suited for a younger, social media-focused demographic is emphasised. "If we go and film something for the BBC now, for TV, umm, we are encouraged if we have time – if it's not necessarily breaking news – if we have time to go and speak to our digital team before we go. Because what will happen when we produce a story if it is deemed that it would do well on say Facebook or digital platforms we go and speak to them about if there's anything extra they would need to put a slightly different spin on the story. It might be that they want something shot from a different angle, it might be that they want a longer shot of certain things. Normally if you're filming something you'd hold something for about ten seconds then you'd move onto the next thing, and they'd be like, no, can you hold it for 30 seconds and we can do something with it. So, yeah, there is a difference there and it's, you know, as we keep hearing particularly in the last week, young people in particular are consuming sport in a very different way. Umm, and that needs to be considered with everything that you're doing now" (p9).
- Social media used by the participant in a non-interactive, one-way manner. In the context of a discussion about critical tweets, she says: "What do you achieve by commenting back? You might end up in a dialogue with someone you don't want to have a dialogue with. It's pointless. So how you use social media? I tend to use it to, err, if I'm at a press conference and something's happened I'll inform people. If I find something interesting in a sport that I'm working in I'll inform people. It might be directing them to a commentary that I'm doing that they might be interested in. People follow me as a general rule because of the sports I cover and they want to know where that content is. That's what I use social media for. I don't use it to have conversations with people" (p19).

## Interviewee 6 - Zeta

### Transcript:

TB: So as I mentioned, [REDACTED] it's very much about personal experience so just reflect on that if you can in your answers.

Int6: Okay.

TB: So, first question. In your experience what are the main ethical issues affecting sports journalists in their daily practice.

Int6: I think... well there's the relationships that you build up so I think you often find that, err, you're going back – because you're going back to the same people time and time again there's often a difficulty with sometimes writing something negative maybe about or... yeah, negative about someone you know you're going to have to go back to and that's when I guess you have to try and argue the point that as long as you're fair and, you know, unbiased you can argue why you wrote it. But certainly that's one of the issues you get time and again really is you come face to face with the people you've just written something bad about. Umm, there's sometimes a dilemma between news and sports. So I found that sometimes a news department will ask you to look into a story – let's say I remember covering Welsh rugby during the early 2000s, 2007, eight, nine, when you had the likes of Gavin Henson, Andy Powell, Jonathan Thomas, Mike Phillips, James Hook, so guys who were, umm, getting up to, you know, a few sort of shenanigans off the field, so you'd often have the news department asking you "Look, can you follow this up?" And that's a really hard dilemma because you've got your relationship with them and the minute you kind of cross over into news reporting... because news reporters are coming from a totally different angle. They'll just do a story – bang – and they might not speak to that person ever again or ever cover that subject ever again, whereas with sport you're coming back time and again. So, one of the biggest issues that I can remember is that dilemma: the, the, the conflict between news and sports reporting. And generally I've just tried to say, "Look, anything that happens off the pitch..." I mean, that's not to say I haven't reported on it. I mean sometimes, you know, especially when you join an agency and the main priority is selling stories, then, yeah, you have to. Umm, so that's one, that's probably a major problem.

TB: You mention about working for an agency, maybe different pressures coming from that, maybe the need to market stories, to sell them in a way. So when you worked for an agency did that differ, was there a different element of ethical issues which arose there, which would be a little bit more...

Int6: Yeah, I mean, for example, one of the big differences now joining the BBC from an agency was when you write for newspapers and agencies you're granted an element of slight... a little bit of freedom. And it's often in the way you couch a story, you know, the way you word it. So, let's say you get a tip from an agent, you know, that a player, they wanna – you know that they're using you because they want to tout their player around and link their player with various different clubs but probably just to get a better deal from the club that they're at. You've only got one source, it's the agent, I mean, it's a good source, it's

as close to the player as you can, but sometimes you'll run stories that you kind of know in your heart of hearts probably won't ever come true. Err, so you link, umm, yeah, you link a player to another club, umm. Football especially, you know, they get, they get touted around and you know the chances of them joining that club are probably very little, but you word it in such a way, you know, you can use words like "set to", "could do", err, "looking into", "being followed". Joining the BBC I noticed that you can't get away with that, err, you don't have that element of freedom. And I think that's probably to do a little bit with the audience – the audience's expectation of the BBC is that it is an absolute. If you write something for the BBC it's an absolute. If it's in the paper I think the readers almost know there's a little bit of, err, it's not a dead cert, it's a possibility. So you have to become kind of clever in the way you word it, to cover yourself, that you're not – you never make anything up. I mean that's, I've never done that. Have I written stories that I know probably won't happen? Yeah. A lot. Working for the agency, for an agency, where, as I said, your prime, your primary sort of, the *mens rea* isn't it, is making money. There is a lot more pressure. And I guess if you are a freelancer as well, even more pressure. I mean, I've seen other journalists blatantly make up stories. But, because if they're a freelancer they've got, you know, they've got a, they might have a wife and kid and family to look after. If you haven't sold a story for a couple of days, I mean, I've experienced it at an agency when the pressure starts coming on and you haven't written a story or you haven't got a story in the paper. And I just think, thank God my, my, you know, I've got a bill to pay and I haven't sold a story, because I was getting a regular income. Err, but I think for freelancers there's a real pressure there to sell and to bend the truth.

TB: So in a way the, the currency of the freelancer or in some cases maybe the agency journalist is dealing in isn't necessarily always truth, it might be the marketability of a story?

Int6: Ah, absolutely, yeah, yeah. And you can repackage stories as well. You can go back. So... sometimes you'll see a story in a local paper and you'll think, "Ok, I can repackage that and sell it to the nationals." Or you'll just revisit a story, umm, and you're not actually coming up with anything new – maybe you just write it better. Or write it in a more sexy way, or.... Local papers will obviously go down a very local route, so their priority will probably be the club. You might sort of take it more from the angle of the player, if it's a big name you think you can sell that. So, yeah, you often regurgitate stories or rewrite stories, or just revisit a story with nothing really new, but it's because you know you can sell it. Yeah.

TB: You mentioned about some journalists "blatantly" making stories up. Is that sort of purely out of that desperation to...

Int6: ... Yeah, I think so, I think so. What I would say is, and I can honestly say this having worked for 20 years in journalism, mostly in sport, that I could count on one hand the guys who would do that. You know, and you meet, I don't know, hundreds of journalists over the years. I can honestly count on one hand the guys who've done that. Err, but you know when they have and I think everyone knows when they have, but I think everyone sort of turns a bit of a blind eye because they just think "Well, you know, he's got, he's got to make ends meet." Umm, yeah, it... and all those guys are not, they weren't, umm, I don't think they were staff reporters. I think, I think I can probably name, think of three – definitely three or

four, and all of those were freelancers and probably struggling a little bit at the time, just because it's so competitive, the market. It just, I've noticed in the 20 years I've been in, the competition is getting fiercer and fiercer, just more people trying to do this job, trying to eek out a living. So, umm, yeah, yeah, definitely. The only reason I think is because of desperation for money. Yeah, to make a living.

TB: Ok. In terms of the nature of the stuff that was being fabricated was it around kind of transfer player movement stuff or...

Int6: ... That's the easiest one to do. Yeah, I mean because no-one can really prove or disprove that you're wrong, err. Is anyone gonna push it? We all know that we all go to sources and we all use different links so everyone's got their own kind of connections, so no-one's... And is it such a big deal if so-and-so's been linked to that and actually they weren't? It's not the worst crime in the word, is it? It's not... you haven't said someone's done, committed a crime when they didn't commit it, so I think there's an element of you can probably get away with certain stuff if it's not too serious. Umm, yeah. I think, I think that's, I don't think I've seen anything I can't remember seeing anything too serious. I mean there's the age-old battle then about headlines, isn't there? You know, so that's a whole other subject there really.

TB: So, do you think a sports journalist has duties and if they do have duties to whom do they have them?

Int6: Oooh. Yeah, do you know what, I think that's a dilemma that sports journalists face more than any other. If you think of news reporters it's just report what happens, report the news. Gone. If you think of, err, I don't know, theatre critics, they are savage aren't they and they can be, they're almost expected to be savage. But sport is a really tricky one because you might get, if you work for a local paper – a local paper, a local agency, whatever – you'll be covering the same teams, and you follow that team all through the season, and I remember, umm, I remember one of my first, when I first got into sport I was working for [REDACTED] and I had to cover Pontypridd and Bridgend – they were my two clubs. And I followed them the whole two seasons and it was fantastic. You know, you're literally in the changing rooms with them. And you can't help, when you're covering them week in week out all season long, you can't help but get a bit – you try not to be a supporter but you can't help but sort of hope that they do well. First of all because it's just easier to write about success, isn't it? So, when something bad happens, umm, yeah it does kind of make life far, far more difficult to write a, a critical report, or the match player ratings are always difficult aren't they because they are probably the first thing that the players read, and if you give someone a five the next time you see them that's the first thing they'll say is, "Why did you give me a five?" So there are real, umm, they're not ethical problems, are they, they're more sort of emotional and, yeah, more emotive dilemmas really. It's like how tough do you want to get on someone when you've followed them all year long and, err, you know you're going to be dealing with them week in, week out? So sport I think, unlike any other, has those dilemmas. How do you get round them? A thick skin is good, you know, and the willingness to stick up for yourself, not be bullied. I mean, I know... you do see a lot of local reporters who absolutely blindly follow and will just toe the party line and over the years I've seen guys who've followed, you know, followed football teams, the same football team,

for maybe 20 years, and they will take everything that they're given and they'll swallow every lie and every spin and every angle. And, you know, when the manager tries to come up with an excuse for a really shit performance they'll just believe it. And you think, and you have to keep reminding yourself that you are a journalist and you have to hold up that mirror and say: was that good enough, you know, and ask those difficult questions. And hopefully if you've built up that relationship and you can ask them in the right way the manager, the coach, the player will respect that. I've had plenty of dust-ups with coaches and managers, you know, even up to Warren Gatland when he was first at Wales. Steve Hansen. I mean I've had toe-to-toe, I've had a toe-to-toe barney with Steve Hansen in a bar in New Zealand. I think he was gonna, I think he was about to punch me any minute because I'd been so critical of their performance but you have to stand your ground and say, "Well, it wasn't a good performance and you can't just say all the same excuses that coaches reel off." You have to keep asking those questions.

TB: We have to keep asking those questions because you have that sense of a duty of being honest to readers, being honest to yourself?

Int6: Yeah, yeah and to yourself as well, but you cannot forget – it's really easy in sports journalism to slip into just becoming a spokesman for the club and you have to keep saying to yourself, 'No, you're not there to be a spokesman.' So when I worked at [REDACTED] we had a very close relationship with Cardiff City. And it was, you know, a two-way thing because, you know, they needed us and in a way we needed them because Cardiff City fans bought the paper. Err, and they wanted us because they wanted to promote – we were the local story (sic) – they wanted to promote all their events, fundraising events and community stuff. But so many times we got banned from there for asking those difficult questions and at first you think "Oh my God, how are we going to survive? They're one of our biggest sources of stories." And it's the same for all local papers. But you have to make a point and say, "No. We have to. Why? Well, for the readers." And if you're not asking those questions the readers will suss you out because they can see what's happening and they'll wonder, well, why aren't you asking those questions? And you are that connection between the fans, the readers and the club. So you have to ask the questions that you know people on the terrace would want to ask. Err, and also, I suppose, your own journalistic pride. You don't want to be seen as a sap for a club, do you, you want to be seen as someone who asks fair and tough questions and, you know, if you're ambitious as a journalist that's going to get you somewhere rather than just being written off, yeah, as a fan with a typewriter.

TB: So you've already explained some of them there, I think, but in terms of important qualities – ethical qualities – that sports journalists should have, what do you think they should be? Or what do you think a sports journalist should seek to cultivate? So you've mentioned there I suppose about an independence of mind.

Int6: Yeah, absolutely. Erm, stubbornness. Thick skin. Thick skin is really important because you are going to have disagreements, you're going to have barneys, you're going to have, as I said before, you're going to come face to face with the guy you wrote off and gave them a two out of ten, you know. The next week you might rock up to the press conference and there he is. Well, don't be a shrinking violet. Stand up for yourself and say, look, this is why I did it. I mean, I've had barneys with British Lions players, you know, the best players Wales



has seen for decades. But if they had a bad game then they had a bad game, you know, they just don't like people saying it. So, yeah, a thick skin, umm, be sort of, you know, the ability to see both sides. You know, you can't just be too cynical. It's very easy to be cynical. "Ah, this is rubbish, this is shit. He's rubbish, that's crap." Sometimes you do have to look at the reasons behind it, erm, and not also just say everything's great. So, yeah, to be balanced. Inquisitive, you know, you have to keep asking questions. Because one thing in sport – oh, and imaginative as well, really – because the one thing in sport is that it's very easy to ask shit questions. And so often now, and **I think at press conferences now the questions are getting worse and worse. And that means the answers are getting blander and blander.** And players now are so well coached, so well versed in giving the right answer, that you have to start becoming a bit more, err, what's the word, a bit more creative in the way you come about questions and coming up with different questions. Umm, I think that's quite important nowadays. Yeah, especially now as I said with players being so well coached. What else?... Yeah, just to have a bit of a dogged edge about you really, to just keep... You ask a question you'll get a bland answer. You ask a second question you'll get a bit more of an answer, because most coaches will expect the question you're going to ask. It's the third question or fourth question that you ask that suddenly breaks down those stock answers and gets you somewhere. So having that stubbornness just to keep plugging away.

TB: And if there isn't that creativity in posing the questions is it arguably truth that suffers because you're forever then playing into the hands of the coach maybe...

Int6: Yeah, you just get the answer that the press officer's probably just coached the player in. I mean, before every coach and player comes in you can see the press officers briefing them. And you know they're quickly briefing them on what questions are likely to come up and the answers to give. **So if you just ask those same questions that everyone else is expecting you'll get, exactly, the superficial answer that doesn't really get to the truth at all.** It doesn't cut to why, you know, why a certain player's playing badly, maybe he had a bad day but maybe there's something far more behind it – maybe he's having a tough time off the field or maybe he's going through an injury that no-one knew about or maybe he's unsettled because he's looking to go somewhere else. There's so many different reasons and **if you only ask the very obvious question you won't get to the truth, and every story will be the bloody same.**

TB: Yeah. Where do you think sports journalists get their sort of professional values from? Do you think they're something that's a personal thing, do you think it's something that's maybe instilled in them by the environment in which they work as trainees or in which they're working?

Int6: Yeah, it's a good question. I mean, when I was at [REDACTED] I had to recruit, part of my job was recruiting the new guys and you could see almost straight away the guys who had it. I say "guys" – men and women. The young journalists who had it and those who didn't. And there was an eagerness about the guys... the reporters you could see who had something about them, there was an eagerness about them, an energy about them, an enthusiasm, a hunger. Now where does that come from? I guess part of it is probably in you. I mean, the guys, some reporters who didn't really have a bit of that, we could work it into them, but it's almost like you're teaching them how to do it rather than it

coming naturally. I think there are, I think there is such a thing as a sort of, if you're a naturally inquisitive person and enthusiastic person and a, umm, determined person, I think you'll progress quicker. That's not to say you can't learn those journalistic skills. So, for example, I started at a little local, at a little local weekly paper, readership of about 4,000. But my editor was always on at me. "What have you got today? What have you got today? What's happening? What's the latest with such and such?" And you had to be, I had to know – be on top of what was happening. So to be that every day I thought, "Right, I need to make sure I know what's happening with that guy, and what's happening with that story, and what's the latest with that?" So that taught me really good skills, which I suppose you work on and develop. So I think there's a lot to be said for the first, those early years. If you have someone who instils those good journalistic core values – asking questions, being on top of stuff, building contacts – I think that does set the journalist on a really good path, because I fear that young journalists are getting lazy. Lazier. Part of that is to do with social media, that's an element. I could see it, actually, with the journalists we were taking on at the agency. How their dependence on social media grew. The first few years before it was around guys would just, you know, they'd want to get out there – press conferences, they'd be taking numbers, asking for people's phone numbers, ringing them up, working on the phones constantly. And then social media came in. And the other thing obviously is that clubs put barriers. Agents. They started employing press officers and more and more barriers between you and the players. But also I think the journalists' reliance on "I'm going to wait for the story to come to me". [pause in interview while noisy coffee machine subsides] I think there's an increasing reliance on social media and the attitude "Well, the story will come to me." And I think it's really important that, err, wherever journalists – young journalists – start, whether it's a university or whether it's their first job, that they're told, "Right, don't solely rely on social media." The phone is used to call people as well as an avenue to Facebook and Twitter. Umm, yeah.

TB: Good. We'll turn to social media a little bit later but just on the idea of where values come from, what about the bearing that codes of practice have – the Editors' Code of Practice for print journalists, there's obviously the BBC Editorial Guidelines, there's Ofcom. What kind of bearing do they have on sports journalists' professional practice, do you think? Or do they not have a huge bearing at all?

Int6: In my experience, very little. I...

TB: Is that because you think they're irrelevant for the sports journalist?

Int6: Largely, yeah. I guess, you know, because a lot of the, the codes of guidelines cover things like privacy, you know, reporting of under-age of youths and minors, court reporting. So when it comes to sports reporting I very rarely, I'm trying to think if I've ever... I mean, if ever I've had to cover maybe a player or sportsman was in court, erm. But, yeah, I don't see the relevance really of those. I'd only really, umm, since I came to the BBC they're far more, you know, for example, probably the BBC's own guidelines really. Erm. But no, very little. I think because the thing is about sport so much of it is opinion. So much of it. So you can argue pretty much anything is, you know, my honestly held opinion if you're fair and balanced etcetera etcetera. But so much of sport is, is, well it's not, it's just not controversial enough really, is it, I think? For the codes and stuff.

TB: You mentioned there about sometimes having to have the tenacity or the thick skin to go sometimes toe-to-toe with a manager and stand up. Is there maybe some, would it be useful to have some sort of framework within which sports journalists were aware of the importance of not becoming a lackey or a, you know, mouthpiece for a club? Or is that something that's probably best served just through a, you know, good education through a good editor rather than a code?

Int6: Yeah, because I think in a way you kind of can't help some guys becoming that mouthpiece because, you know, they live and breathe within that club and sometimes I think what a lot of papers employ is sort of good cop, bad cop. So you get a guy who is sort of possibly the lackey who is there day in day out, he's in with the club and, you know, will get the nods and steers for things ahead. And, you know, that's... being that guy doesn't mean you don't get stories because, perhaps, you know, if, if you're seen as a friend of the club they're going to come to you first with, "Listen, we've got this signing coming up." You know, you get passed stuff, you get handed loads of stuff. You know, the local *Gloucester Citizen* guy will always get the nod for the Gloucester stories. Then a lot of papers will have the guy then they bring in to do the bashing stories, you know, so it doesn't ruin – not to ruin Reporter A's relationship they'll get Reporter B to do something. Umm, can you put a framework in place? I don't know, I don't think so. I don't think so, I think it comes down to the editorial judgement of the title in question – how, which way to they want to go? Do they want to, do they want to battle the club or do they want to be a mouthpiece and it's a difficult balance and often there are other things. *For example, the Western Mail recently, well, a couple of years ago, had a real problem with the WRU (Wales Rugby Union) because they were seen to be negative about Wales, negative about the WRU, so the WRU threatened to pull all their advertising. Umm, they were major contributors to the advertising budget. And it caused real consternation within the Western Mail. What do they do? You know, how do they handle this, because increasingly now newspapers are businesses. Can they afford to take an editorial stance like that?* So, but in terms of a framework, I don't think you can, no. I think it comes down to the reporter, it kind of comes down to the editorial judgement of his editor or her editor or, and the newspaper, depending on which way they want to go. Umm, have I had difficulty, *I'm just trying to think now, if ever I've been sort of blocked from writing a story... I don't think so, but I have heard of journalists being, being – the story not appearing because it was knocked down, sorry, because they were seen to be knocking down the club or organisation and the title decided they weren't going to run it. So that does happen. Not a great deal, I think.*

TB: Those are arguably forms of economic censorship. You know, we won't make any money – if we run this story, our top line's going to suffer because so-and-so won't spend any money with us advertising.

Int6: Yeah, and I think sports clubs are probably more financially, a bit more financial clout than newspapers. So if it comes to it, like I mentioned about pulling advertising, newspapers are desperate for advertising, aren't they, so you lose that, you could be talking losing jobs. If a club doesn't get on with a paper, do they lose much? It used to be they'd probably say "Yeah", they saw it as important, but *now increasingly clubs are taking so much in-house – they've got their own TV programmes, their own websites, their own newsletters, their own*

email list – they are seeing newspapers and the media as not so necessary, so they can possibly bully the journalists a bit more. Umm, and that’s where we come back to, the journalists, you know, you can get a little bit bullied sometimes, although they’ll try and bully you and that’s where, as I said, you know, you’ve got to have a pair of, I won’t say pair of balls because there’s female reporters as well, but some guts to stick up for yourself.

TB: Just moving to digital and social media a bit now. What impact do you think the requirement to get more and more eyeballs on stories has had on sports journalism, both the quantity of it and the quality of it?

Int6: Well, the quantity is just, you know, increased ten-fold hasn’t it now? Whereas you were expected as a newspaper journalist you’d be expected to come up with a couple of stories a day – one or two – now, you know, you’re expected to come up with far more than that – double, treble. Erm, I’ve heard of newsrooms now where they have literally a scoreboard on the wall which shows how many hits your stories are getting. Erm, and while I remember actually, for example, one of the effects of that as well is there are certain stories then that don’t get covered because it’s perceived that they won’t get any hits. So, for example, athletics. Athletics stories – athletics coverage – for example in Wales has plummeted, even though we have lots of great athletes, and we always have had great athletes, you know, going back to like Colin Jackson, Jamie Baulch, Iwan Thomas, erm, you know, and still today with Dai Greene and Rhys Williams, but athletics reporting has virtually died. And that’s because if you put an athletics story on it just doesn’t get the same sort of hits as a story about, erm, Dan Biggar or a story about Gareth Bale. But does that mean you should ignore it? No. You should, you should... athletics deserves that coverage and in a way then there’s a public service issue there. Sometimes, you know, you should sometimes write stories you know, look, this isn’t going to get a massive readership but we need to do our bit to cover it. And it’s sport, it’s cricket, whatever. But now media outlets just don’t bother. And in fact I know journalists who report, who do athletics, and are almost sneaking through athletics stories – sort of doing it on the side – because if they’d asked, “Look, I’m going to do this story,” they’d be told, “No, don’t do it. Waste of time. Do something else.” But then, as I said, athletics coverage dies. Same with cricket coverage. Cricket coverage has, has been affected because, well, that’s probably because papers can’t afford to have someone covering cricket for five days. Umm, going on to the quality, has social media improved the quality? No, not at all. Because if, if... the onus now is on quantity and getting hits. And it’s almost like you kind of know what you can do. Let’s put the word “Gareth Bale” in a story, in a headline. Let’s put “Gavin Henson” in a headline. “Dan Biggar”. “Alan Wyn Jones”. “Aaron Ramsey”. The story itself might be utterly crap. You know, there might be absolutely nothing in it. It might be regurgitated from, I don’t know, a week old, but it’s all about getting a name in a headline to get it to click. And, you know, suddenly, then this pressure comes on journalists as I said, where you’ve got like scoreboards on the wall and suddenly, you know, you’re talking this added pressure now of, err, are your stories getting any clicks and you’re now being judged by that? Yeah, other stories are struggling, as in subjects are struggling. So, in the terms of the quantity and quality, yeah, far more quantity, err, but to the detriment – to the huge detriment – of quality, I’d say. Because it’s all about the click. It’s not about is the story any good, does it tell you anything new. And it’s also, you’ve seen this now, the increase in things like “Twenty best players who never played for Wales.” Or it will be some random number like 32 or 16 or 17 or whatever. Apparently there’s an

optimum number, I think 17 or something. So that's not because there's any real value in it, it's just because, right, we thought of eight or nine but now we need to come up with another 10 to get more clicks. Not really a particular editorial reason but just because they want to get more clicks. So there's a lot of that sort of stuff going on. You know, the "Twelve players that Cardiff City should look to sign before..." I mean, why 12? Why? Are any of these 12 players – have they actually been linked to Cardiff? Are there any connections to the team? No. It's just, let's come up with 12 people just because we're going to get 12 clicks. So, you know, then you come back to the ethics thing as well of, if you're asked to do that – come up with 12 players that Cardiff City should sign before they go to the Premier League – well, what are you basing it on? It becomes totally random and not based on any sort of sound editorial or journalistic skill, just.. it's almost plucking names out of a hat. So, does that do anything for journalism? Not at all.

TB: Has clickbait affected your own practice in any way? Have you come under pressure to incorporate that bait?

Int6: No. Thankfully not. However, I suppose.. now... I... No, I'd say no. We are aware, for example, now I work at the Beeb, so when you put a story up, you're aware of like Chartbeat, which measures how many people are on your story. So you're aware of if your story's doing well or not, but you're not judged by it. Umm, and, you know, you could argue it's a good tool because then you can, you know, rearrange your front page according to which stories people are clicking on. So there is, it's not all negative, there is a positive side to that kind of analysis, err, analytics. But I haven't, no, I haven't come across that because I think because most of my career was spent at an agency, the pressure on an agency was different. It was more about selling the story. I think if, I'm more aware of that being a problem for guys who are sort of staff, staff on local, on titles. So, if you work for Media Wales or a local paper or, umm, they're under huge pressure to get those clicks.

TB: You mentioned a little earlier about how you'd seen, particularly among younger journalists, the tendency maybe to be a bit sedentary, to be just combing through social media feeds to get their stories rather than being out and about gathering material. More generally, do you think the rise of social media has given rise to any other ethical issues for sports journalists?

Int6: Well I guess you've got a lot of, erm, plagiarism goes on now, I think. There's very little original content. It's more about, you know, stumbling across a bit of video or, I don't know, watch this whacky goal celebration from the Brazilian third division. Umm, you know, is it interesting? Yeah, it might be a bit of fun. Is it original? No. Has it taken any journalistic skill? No. Erm. Are you sure about where the source has come from? No. And then suddenly, again, you know, I think quite often not enough checks are done. Is this, is this the real... We had an issue, I tell you what, we had a real... one of the lads at the agency had spotted Aaron Ramsey had said something on his Twitter. Big name for us Aaron Ramsey. Great, let's – I can't remember what the story was – I think he'd been injured. He'd been out for some time with an injury and there was some sort of suggestion about when he might be coming back. Great, we could sell a story about Aaron Ramsey easily enough. Is it the real Aaron Ramsey Twitter page? We were virtually writing the story when suddenly someone asked the question. Is this the real Ramsey? Oh shit, hang on, yeah, is it? We don't know.

And then when you dig a bit further you realise actually there are two or three Aaron Ramey accounts. So there's a whole new raft perhaps of issues that I never had to deal with when I started, was things like that – authenticity of material. So much, you know, you hear the word “fake news” but so much, so many videos are doctored, so many videos are manipulated, so much. There's very little way of checking. And let's face it, not everything you see or read on the internet is real and genuine. So there are major questions and major dilemmas for journalists now. We're using that as a source. Is this, am I seeing, is it real? Is it true? Is it genuine. And then I suppose you come back then to your core values, isn't it, about checking facts. Again you have to. And it's probably quite hard to check some of those facts but you have to. You can't just simply repeat what someone else has said online because who it is, you know, or if what they're saying is real. So, yeah, there are new dilemmas I think for young journalists coming through, well all journalists coming through, umm, that I never had to face when I first started.

TB: In your experience have you ever breached the law or code of practice as far as you're aware in terms of pursuing a story?

Int6: [long pause] Hmm, have I?... Erm, I remember very early in my journalistic career, I really wanted to do a story on drugs in the local area, and we kind of said that we'd been sent this drug but actually we went and bought it. Because we needed to get our hands on a drug to illustrate the problem. So, there was obviously a bit of, a little white lie there. Erm, I suppose we tried to argue about the fact it was in the public interest. Erm, I suppose I'd probably still argue that, I think.

TB: That's more of a news story though.

Int6: Yeah, news. Sport-wise, erm, ethically, no. Obviously, I was working for the *News of the World* when the whole, when the whole phone-tapping scandal happened, but I can honestly say I was never, I didn't know how to do it. I wish I had, I might have got some more stories [spoken with undertow of laugh], but I was never aware of that and how they did that.

TB: Do you think, I mean, were you speaking jokingly there or literally? I mean, if you had been aware of it on the sport side of things do you think you would have pursued it if that was the sort of going culture within the news room?

Int6: Oh, probably, yeah, if I'm honest. You know, especially when you're younger and you're ambitious and you want to move up and you wanna, you know, you're kind of thinking “How am I going to get this story?” There's, you know, pressure coming at you from, there's pressure coming at you from above, from your editors, you know, you need to come up with stories, especially when you're working for a big title like that, you know, you're judged on, are you the sort of guy who finds stories? Editors usually, and I... do editors ask a lot of... I'm trying to think now if they've ever asked me about where a story came from. In the past, editors didn't really care where a story came from as long as it was true, you know, they'd say to you, “Is it right. You're not making it up?” “No.” “Ok, let's run.” You know, they didn't care where it came from. Erm, if I knew how to tap phones.... Oh. Hand on heart, I can't say that I wouldn't have and I could easily see myself that I would have done it, just because you



want to make a name for yourself, you want to find a story, err, if the culture is there, other people are doing it then, yeah, why not. And let's face it, it wasn't just *News of the World* who were doing it, so. Umm, I can easily, easily understand how – why and how – journalists did that, yeah. Umm...

TB: You're not aware of it being at the time, you know, the phone-hacking stuff was occurring on the news desk, you're not aware of any red-top sports desks being involved in that as well?

Int6: No. No. I don't think so. I don't think so. No. Trying to think now if ever I, umm, bent the rules or not... No, no, I mean you sometimes get sort of, you get the dilemma of, of, you know, people pass you... You might get a story, kind of, and you know you should probably ring the person it's about to check it out, but then you're worried that they'll knock it down. Or sometimes, you know, you'll get a story from, about, I don't know, even if it's just something trivial like a club is, you know, they're interested in this sort of player, or they're going to sell that player, and you get it from another outside, and you just think, if I go to the club, which I probably should do, they're going to knock it down, and then I can't write it. So maybe I'll write it, and then I'll go to the club, and then I'll get another story tomorrow about them knocking it down [laughs]. So, I think that happens a lot. You kind of don't go to the people you know are going to knock down a story. So is that right? Probably, you know, students would be told "You need to go and get both sides of the story." Sometimes you think, ahh.

TB: And there's maybe that, umm, sense in terms of justifying it to oneself as a sports journalist, you might say: well, you know, I will go to them but we'll just do it after you've published the story and balance it out?

Int6: Yeah, and why do you do that? Probably because you're thinking well I can get two stories out of one subject here or, you know, if you think then if you're a freelancer or agency, you're going to get paid twice for one story. And of course the risk is you might not get paid at all if you send it and they don't like it, and they think, well, the club's knocking it down we won't take it. So you're far more likely to sell the story if you get the one angle and then do the second angle the next day. So, ethically is it right? Probably not. But it, you know, I've done that. I used to do that all the time.

TB: This has maybe occurred in the course of some of your answers already, but to what extent do you think self-censorship occurs within sports journalism? So, the deliberate kind of withholding of stuff you know to be the case, or an honestly held opinion that you've got that you maybe refrain from delivering.

Int6: I think, I think too much of that happens. For example, erm, right, funnily enough just this week now, erm, [redacted] tweeted the most bonkers tweets. He seemed to be, he seemed to be admitting to something, whether it's the use of drugs – [redacted], you know, double world champion, Commonwealth [redacted] champion, British champion. So when... looking at his timeline on social media he looks to be honest like he's having a bit of a meltdown, maybe he's [redacted]. So immediately now I went to the guys who are the sports correspondents – guys who follow sport – "What's

going on here?" And they said, "Ah, yeah, he's, he's kind of having a bit of a meltdown." So then my first instinct was, well, there's a story here because, you know, he's a world champion and, you know, he's just tweeted and once you tweet it's public, it's out there. I suppose that's one good thing about social media, you know, suddenly then it does put you immediately in contact with sports stars, it bypasses all press officers and the agents. But had I not raised it the guys who cover boxing, because they knew all about it, never mentioned it, never mentioned to us "Look, he's going through some difficulties and he's having a bit of a meltdown." And then I suppose you've got this sort of, err, what's the phrase I'm looking for, duty of care which some journalists I think take too seriously. I think, and again it goes back to that whole thing of are you a journalist or are you a spokesman? And journalists can get very protective over their contacts and their relationships and sometimes I think to the detriment then of not reporting the full news. So clearly this story needed to be followed up. [REDACTED] seemed to be admitting to something – off the record, I think he's admitted to, you know, I think [REDACTED]. But there's clearly a story there going on. You know, we built this guy up, we followed him through all his highs, but we need to remember to report on the lows as well. And sports journalists, I think, get too protective of the people that they're covering, err, to the detriment sometimes of the news value of something. Umm, and it kind of goes back to issues of, err, when sportsmen go bad, you know, it's like, you just think, "Ahh, oh god, I don't want to get involved in this. Leave it to the news reporters." Because you don't want to ruin your relationship with that person. Umm, but as a journalist, you probably, you probably should report it but you, as a sports journalist, you rely so much upon those contacts and relationships that it's a totally different dynamic. Umm, but I think sports journalists probably protect them too much and a lot – a lot – of stories never see the light of day simply because sports journalists don't want to ruin their relationships. I think a lot, well, yeah, every week there's stories that never come out because of something or other. Err, yeah.

TB: Relatedly, maybe, what about the influence of sports press officers? Arguably media managers they're getting more influential as clubs seek to have their own...

Int6: ... Yeah, they're a pain in the arse, aren't they? Let's face it. Umm, if I, it's becoming one of the key, it's becoming one of the key things now being a sports journalist is handling and getting relationships with press officers. That relationship becomes almost as important as any other for a journalist because, umm, you get a good press officers, so for example Swansea City have got a great press officer. If you build up that relationship, it's one of the core relationships to build up now, isn't it? I mean, it's a pain in the backside because it used to be that you just used to go along to training and you'd pretty much just pick off whoever you wanted as they came off the training ground. I mean, it was brilliant. There was no one looking over their shoulder, you just grabbed who you want. I mean, as I said, when I first started my career most of my interviews were done in the changing rooms after the matches. I mean, you know, players round me stark naked, you know, coming out of the shower and I'd be interviewing them and speaking. Now that'd never happen, umm, which is a shame because you don't get that connection, the players don't get that relationship. So they are... some journalists, some press officers regard themselves as a barrier, like the guard dog at the gates. A good press officer appreciates your job and will work with you and will give you a steer or even if you just say, "Look, I'm going to write this. Am I going to look like an idiot if I write this?" And they'll say, "No you won't." They haven't told you anything



but they've just at least made sure that you're not going to look daft. So, that relationship is becoming vital. So, for example, I mentioned Swansea – Swansea have got a great press officer who will do that, keep you in touch, keep you in the loop, give you a – at least steer you in the right way if you're going to write something. Conversely, [REDACTED]: awful. They just see their, they see their job as a barrier, they will lie, they will not tell you stuff, they'll deliberately block you, turn down any requests without even taking the requests to the coach or to the staff. Umm, so managing them has become almost as important as managing any other contact in sport because of that reason, because they can help you so much and they can make your life really difficult. And then, you know, that's before you mention the influence that they have then on the manager or the person speaking. You know, you can be interviewing someone and they can be sat, you know, the press officer will be sat on their shoulder and if there's anything, if there's one thing that really makes a player uncomfortable it's not so much you sat there chatting to them it's knowing that they've got someone on their shoulder listening to every word and almost sometimes interrupting and hurrying things along and "Right, last question," you know, just as you're getting into the flow of stuff. So, err, being able to work with press officers, yeah, it's, it's a pain in the arse but increasingly important.

TB: There was a – you used the phrase "fans with typewriters" earlier. There used to be that characterisation of sports reporters being just that: fans with typewriters, belonging to the toy department of the newsroom, and being cheerleaders rather than watchdogs. Do you think that's got merit still?

Int6: Yes. Yeah, absolutely. Err, yeah, because sports journalists will invariably duck out of a news story, because of all the reasons I mentioned earlier. Err, they are sometimes not seen as, within newsrooms they won't be seen as hard-nosed journalists. And, for example, I've just come across to news now and last week there was a case where someone had jumped out, it looked like someone had committed suicide at the Vale of Glamorgan Hotel – jumped out of a bedroom window. So outside was all these police vans, police tape everywhere. It just so happened that morning was the Cardiff City press conference, weekly press conference. Our sport journalists, our journalists went past on their way. No-one stopped to take a photo, no-one stopped to have a look, inquire what's going on, that any other journalist would have. Why? Well, because they kind of, they were just there to do their job, which was sport, which is what does the manager say today? And to me, you know, we had three journalists – experienced old journalists – go past that scene, and none of them stopped. And that did get me thinking, gosh, it's just not in their heads. It just wasn't in their heads that there's a news story going on here. They'd just become so single-minded, so single-mindedly focused. So, yeah, I think there is, umm, you become, your viewed as an expert, you know, your knowledge is respected, your knowledge is appreciated and there are times when, you know, you are called upon because of your expertise and your inside knowledge, you know, it's understood you have an inside knowledge but are you regarded as a hard journalist? No, probably not. I think the journalists – the news journalists – probably wouldn't regard the sports guys as journalists. I think they're more regarded as reporters. They're reporting what's happening, they're not regarded as digging out the news. And I think so there is an element of that I think, yeah.

TB: I mean, should we just accept that as the role that sports journalists have? That they are, as you say, kind of operating on a more superficial level, or should there be an expectation that they will do investigative stuff as well? And related to that, do you think there is too much of an emphasis on sports journalists going from press conference to press conference to match and back to press conference? I suppose it's about what it is to be a sports journalist.

Int6: Yeah, it's very diary-based, isn't it sports journalism? And in fact one of the reasons, one of the reasons I've moved on now to news very recently is because I found it a little bit, that routine became very repetitive – that it was all based around diary. It was based around matches that are coming up, matches that are happening and matches that have just happened, err, and almost your life becomes the season. You can almost map out your next nine months according to the football and rugby season or sports season, whatever sport it is that you follow. Umm, yes, there aren't, there isn't enough investigative stuff done, but I think that comes back to the whole thing that sports journalists are so reluctant to do them. They are really reluctant to do anything that would spoil their contacts. Because so much now, because of all the barriers that are put up in front of you if you've got a good contact and you've spent time working on a contact you're really reluctant to jeopardise that by doing a news story. Umm, so probably a bit of a result of, a result of the way things have changed with all the barriers that are put in place now is that, yeah, sports journalists now are more reluctant to try and hammer them down. And it's more about working with people, you know, yeah, working with people than against people. So I think you find now that most of the, a lot of the sort of sports news people, you know, the guys who do the inside story, are usually based as part of the news teams. You know, Dan Roan, we've got someone here now who's a sports correspondent – they're actually part of the news team rather than the sports team, umm, because they're kind of coming in from the outside and they have that, they're not burdened by threatening those contacts and the access that you get. Because a lot of sports journalism now is about access, about gaining access to people, getting at the people, especially with TV and radio, especially TV. But for all journalists now it's getting to them rather than – that's the priority now, rather than anything else.

TB: So it sounds like that kind of diarisation of sports journalism – that rigidity of it coupled with what you were saying earlier about the difficulties sometimes of getting press officers on side and all that stuff, did that prompt an element of disillusion? Not disillusion, is that too strong a word in terms of your personal...

Int6: ... For me?...

TB: ... Yes, you mentioned about moving over to news very recently.

Int6: Yeah. Look, what I would say is that I spent 17 years in sport and loved every – pretty much every – minute of it. I mean, I never, I never had those sort of Sunday night blues where you're thinking, oh, I've got another week. I've done, I've done shit jobs where I've thought on a Sunday night, oh my god, I've got another week ahead of me – it's a nightmare. I never once felt like that. I just loved going to work, umm, and the perks are amazing, you know, you get to travel, go around spend a lot of your day out and about. So why did I eventually decide to move on? Yeah, I suppose there's a real routine to it which is

hard to break, ermm, especially if you work – the smaller the title I think the more the routine than if you're working for a bigger title. Also, if you cover different sports it gives you a bit more variety, so not specialising in just one sport, you know, having something to follow, different sports, different people to speak to, umm, because different sports you find, especially with the lesser sports, have great access and great, you know, you get everything you could want. You know, athletes are desperate to talk to you, boxers are desperate to talk to you. It's amazing, you know. It's only football and rugby really where it's starting to become an issue. But it is, there's a real routine to your life. I think, I guess, I remember back in 2016 I'd just gone to cover Wales at the Euros and obviously they got to the semi-finals. And I kind of remember sitting, coming back, and I was on a beach in Cornwall and, umm, that's the only holiday we could afford really because we were a bit skint because it's not great pay, and it was raining and I had a phone call from the office, saying, "Oh, we just need to get access to the accreditation system." I said, "Why?" "Well, because the season starts this Saturday." It was like August and I'd only just come back, it felt like I'd only just come back from the... And I thought "Oh my god, it's all starting, that whole wheel is about to start again." And I just thought, right, ok, well I've seen Wales – the one thing I never thought I'd do is watch Wales football at a major championship, and they got to the semi-final. So I just thought, I think I've ticked all the boxes now. I've kind of done everything I wanted to do. And I stayed in it for about another year but I just felt that, yeah, it was the same stories coming around again and probably I was getting a bit fatigued. I mentioned earlier about, you know, if you ask crap questions you get crap answers, and I was probably just getting a bit fatigued with it all and not... You need to be up and ready and at it and enthusiastic and you need to be 100 per cent because it is a treadmill, you know, it is routine. You literally go from one week to the next to the next, plodding on through the games, through the games. It's relentless, it is absolutely relentless. And of course it used to be just on a Saturday but now, you know, there are games on a Friday night, there's games on a Saturday, there's games on a Sunday, you get games in mid-week. It's great fun but it's a real treadmill. And it's a repetitive treadmill. So, yeah, I think I just got to the point where I just thought, right, I need to do something different for myself really.

TB: Just three more questions now. Connected with that, then, do you think that treadmill you refer to, does that make sports journalism maybe feel like a, more like a trade, if I can put it that way, rather than like a profession? I'm just wondering in terms of how you would see it – more as a craft? I wonder how you perceive it as an industry.

Int6: Yeah, you certainly. Yeah, I think probably like a trade where you learn that trade, you learn how to, umm, you learn how to work with people, you learn, you almost learn how to write reports, you learn how to spot... I mean, I suppose its core journalistic values aren't they, you know, you look at what's the story, what's the angle, all that sort of stuff – you do that whatever story you're writing. There's a bit of a formula to it, I suppose. Match reports – it's something that you can learn. You can learn how to write a match report. I suppose you could theoretically take the same shell of a report and change it if you want to be really lazy. What makes a good journalist, a good sports journalist, is someone who can keep coming up with something creative and something different and something new. And that's where the skill, I suppose that's where the top people stand out, because they come up with something – a lovely different turn of phrase, a lovely... You know, but you've...

TB: ... Elevate it?

Int6: Yeah, elevate it, but you can, at its core, there is a set way of working, there's a set, umm, phrases. You know, you'll probably, you know, if you're covering the same sport you can't help but probably come up with the same phrases over and over again, which is why I think it's really important for sports journalists to read other people's stuff, because you can really easily fall into the trap of just saying the same things over and over because I mean if you say "so-and-so scored a try" well in one game there might be five, six, seven tries and each week, you know, you're going to see lots of tries, so how do you come up with different ways to say the same things? I think that's the trick with sports journalism, is finding new ways of saying often the same thing. Umm, it's definitely a trade, it's a trade to learn. Yeah, because you can, because I suppose of the repetition, the monotony, you realise the best practice, you learn best practice – the best way to go about getting to there, about dealing with that person because they're a bit awkward, the best way of working with him because he's actually a bit more easy going or so-and-so, he likes, you know, you start to learn players' likes and dislikes. Ok, I've got that in common with him, I can mention that. So you can learn your way of working rather than, umm, just doing it off the cuff. Fly-by-night sort of thing.

TB: These days how rigid do you think the distinction is between sports journalism and sports PR?... We've kind of touched on this already about some journalists maybe being a little bit more amenable to the club's whim...

Int6: Yeah, yeah, umm. I think it's still, umm, the distinction is still strong. I think it has to be, otherwise journalism's dead really isn't it, you know. Umm, so the question is in this time now, the appetite that media outlets have now, the volume that they need to produce, possibly stuff that would not see the light of day now does get used just purely because they need to fuel this huge internet machine that they have, you know. The website – they just need more content. The thirst for content is just never-ending. Umm, so potentially stuff gets used now that wouldn't in the past. So maybe, you know, also I would say if you're moving into PR I think the chances now for your stuff to get used are even greater because rather than battling for column inches, if you send a well-written press release, it's more likely to get used now on the internet. Umm, so, but I think we still have to keep that distinction, yeah, we have to otherwise we're signalling our own death knell really, aren't we.

TB: And finally, given the digital age we're in and the impact of social media and what have you, what do you think in today's digital era are the defining, essential characteristics that a sports journalist should have?

Int6: [long pause] Does it change? I don't think it changes really. I, I'd like to think, I'd hope that it's not changing. I mean you have to be, umm, clearly you have to be, you know, digitally, you have to be savvy with where you're accessing stuff now and I mean there's more, potentially there's more information out there just buzzing around, flying around than ever before. So following all the different players, the agents and stuff like that. Umm, I think there's scope and room for being creative, far more creative, err, because the thirst,

that need to keep producing content – you have to keep coming up with stuff, with ideas. And potentially I suppose you can seek inspiration from things that you’ve seen out and about and around. Umm, so I think possibly you have to be a bit more creative now than before. Umm, simply to try and elevate your stuff from everything else. Err, it’s harder now because there’s so much content out there, there’s so many journalists out there, there’s so many people trying to make a living from this sports industry that you really need to find something that’s gonna put you above. Now, is that your writing ability? Is that because you’ve specialised in a subject that no-one else really follows? I mean how many football guys, how many people are there trying to cover football now? Even rugby. Bloody hundreds. How many people are out there though covering sailing, motorsports, snooker, horseracing? They are the guys who are probably going to get work, far more work. So I think there’s more of a need now to come up with something different. What’s going to make it different, your stuff, whether it’s, as I say, is it your writing ability, is it your knowledge of something different, is it your contacts with so-and-so? For example, recently Geraint Thomas, I mean the guys here who knew Geraint Thomas, well, they were just endless work, you know, they were on radio, they were getting interviews, you know, because of their connections with Geraint, the Tour de France winner. But that’s only going to happen every now and then, isn’t it? So, umm, I think the core values remain always the same for journalists, possibly even more so now because we’re relying on social media more for our stories so you need to be more vigilant, all the usual checks, all the fact-checking as you’re writing. But the battle to stand out. I think there’s, locally there was one young journalist who tried to become, I think he tried to make a name for himself by being very cynical and critical, and it came back to bite him on the backside basically because someone, you know. So I think you’ve got to be smart in the way you do it and let’s not just try and be a cynical old fart when you’re 22. You know, you haven’t got the background, you probably haven’t got the knowledge, you haven’t been in the trade long enough to have that level of cynicism. So, yeah, it’s really hard I guess for journalists coming through now and how you make a name for yourself. Umm, yeah, so maybe trying, yeah, as well as all the core stuff, trying to think of something – creativity or, umm, trying to think of something different that can make you stand out. That’s easier said than done though.

TB: Grand.

Int6: Was that alright?

TB: That’s brilliant. Thanks very much [REDACTED].

Int6: I’m trying to think if there’s any other anecdotes that I can remember.

TB: Now’s the time to mention them if they do spring to mind.

Int6: I’m just trying to think... when I was doing *News of the World* stuff.

TB: Yeah, I mean, you know, the Leveson Inquiry well obviously focused a significant amount on the *News of the World* stuff, precipitated by the *News of the World* stuff, very much focused on news journalists. One of the purposes of my research is to, is to – I’m not

comparing myself with Brian Leveson – but to at least look a little bit into sports journalism and the ethics around that, so that’s why I did ask those questions.

Int6: Yeah, I’m just trying to think now.

TB: I mean there’s anonymous sources in red tops, you know, the tradition of “a pal said” and “a source close to”...

Int6: ... And paying for stories as well was always a tricky one, because sometimes the first second when people knew you were writing for, when people knew you were writing for *News of the World* the first thing that they would say is “Is there any money in this?” And that was a really tricky one because essentially we were told they wouldn’t pay for it because they didn’t want to start going down that route but there were ways around it, so, umm, I took, I took players out for dinners or we made a contribution to a charity, for example, of their choosing or, umm. Oh, we did pay for stories, yeah, absolutely. I remember paying, umm, at the time of the [REDACTED] we had to try and come up, find another follow up from that and I remember [REDACTED] talking about the fact he’d done it in [REDACTED]. And when I said that, because it was such a big story at the time it was just like, I was told, “Right, yeah, tell him we’ll pay for it. Don’t go anywhere else. Nail him down. We’ll pay for that.” We’re only talking about 500 quid or something like that, but that was one of the things that I used to come across when people knew who you were writing for. If, and probably it must happen now with the bigger titles, especially the tabloids. The first assumption, the first question, yeah, still now yeah, when I was writing for the, err, yeah, the first question would be “Is there money in this?” Of course, originally you’d say “No, no, no, there’s not,” but that’s not to say that there wasn’t if it was worth it. And then, I suppose, there’s the question then if, well, and of course then the question, well I would go back to the office and say, “Right, I’ve got this but he wants money for it.” The next question would be, well, is what he says going to be worth paying for? Umm, so then of course you then have that, you’re then in the back of your mind thinking, right, well if we’re paying for this he needs to say something good. So when you start the interview and you get the answers and you thought, and then in the back of your mind you’re thinking, “Yeah, it wasn’t that great, he could do a bit...” and then you start pushing and pushing and you start asking a bit more questions and, err, do you lead them a little bit? Possibly, yeah, you possibly lead them down to get them to open up a bit more, I mean I, you know, the journalists would argue, well, I’m just asking questions so that they open up and get to the truth but, ohhh, maybe someone from outside might say, “Oh, you’ve put words in their mouth.” But essentially I think as long as you think, well no, this is, this is the essence of what they were saying perhaps you’re just putting it into more dramatic wording and context, err. Because you have to justify if you’re gonna, you know, if you’re gonna pay for it. So, that was another, yeah, I suppose ethically that was another dilemma that we had when you’re writing for a tabloid is when the whole payment issue gets involved.

TB: Do you feel uncomfortable about the very notion of making a payment for a story? Or is it part of the business?

Int6: Umm, yeah, I felt a bit uncomfortable because then, I didn’t feel uncomfortable with the process of paying someone for a story because you kind of knew that that was

happening anyway. I was more uncomfortable with the thought of, right, this has got to justify the payment, and then there was a pressure on me as a journalist, because if I went back and said, "This is what they said," and the editor would say, "Well, why the hell have we paid for this?" So I was uncomfortable – not uncomfortable – I just knew there was a pressure on. There was a pressure then on the journalist to make sure that this story was worth every penny that we've just forked out. Umm, it's the same I suppose with writing columns. I've done a lot of columns over the years and obviously columnists get paid and that's, err, a difficult relationship for journalists, for sports journalists, which I suppose is unlike any other, umm, area because you don't get a lot, most columns written by the people are actually written by the person themselves, it's usually a correspondent, isn't it, but sports columns are invariably written by the journalists because none of the players are that sort of qualified to write it. So you have to write it. And I've written columns and through one reason and another – not through my own fault – the columnist never said a word of it, because maybe you just couldn't get hold of them. Umm, so over the years, I've done...

TB: ... So you wouldn't even get it signed off?

Int6: No, no. So, umm, I've done, I did [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] And there were times where, yeah, that person didn't say a word of it. Umm, you know, you try, it's not because you've done anything wrong. So, for example, it might be Wales are playing a Test match on Saturday so you need to get [REDACTED] reaction, and [REDACTED] just not available, or [REDACTED] is not available. So what do you do? Well, you've got to get something, you know, they're crying out for it. So you've just got to go with it and then you just give them a text and say, "Listen, this is what you've said" and pray that they don't come back to you and say, you know. You've got to... those are probably the hardest things you ever write because essentially you're writing the words of someone else who didn't say a word of it. Err, and then there's the pressure on them, you know, columns have to say something. So I remember [REDACTED] was always a nightmare because you'd speak to [REDACTED], you could speak for an hour and he'd just sit on the fence. He'd argue one way, he'd argue the other way and then you'd write it and there's nothing. And of course straightaway the editor would say, "This is rubbish. He needs to say something." So you'd have to lead them to come up with an opinion or you almost had to say, "Well, ok, he said this and he said that, so which way am I going to go? I'm going to have to take one or the other. I'll maybe try and balance it out a little bit but you have to lead off on the stronger line." Erm, so there's a little bit of your own, umm, you know you're manipulating I suppose what they've said to come up with an angle. Umm, so those are hard, those are hard to write, columns. Because people don't speak in naturally dramatic tones, do they? Err, but you have to put them into some sort of, liven them up, really. Err, you have to liven them up while staying true to what they're saying and sounding like it is them saying it. Umm, so that's hard. But, yes, many, many, many times I've written columns, err, that the person themselves never said a word. But that's just a pressure of working for a newspaper and the pressure of deadlines. And then, I suppose, you trust your relationship with that person and they put a lot of trust in you really. Umm, but there you go. I don't think it's, err, yeah, I wrote a, I wrote a column once for [REDACTED] and he was speaking about an injury to [REDACTED] and he revealed more about this injury than anyone had ever known – that [REDACTED] had had



trouble with his eye, his sight. It got picked up by the BBC and of course went massive. The WRU weren't happy then because [REDACTED], and [REDACTED] to be honest in his column it was actually a bit of a throwaway comment. And it was only afterwards when I was going through it did I realise, oh gosh, hang on, this is more than we ever... It was only when I sort of looked into the injury and I was looking into what the injury was with [REDACTED] that I realised he just said more than we'd ever known before. So I'd try to go back to [REDACTED], couldn't get hold of him, they sort of highlighted that angle of that injury – it became a big thing, I think they splashed it on the front. And suddenly this passing comment became a big story. Umm, you know, it went on the BBC, it went everywhere. Umm, but to be fair, [REDACTED] never came back and said "Bloody hell, what have you put me in? You've put me in a bit of crap here." He never said that, and I suppose that's to do with the relationship that you've got with them. But it's fraught with danger.

TB: Thank you very much.

### **Initial Distillation – Zeta:**

- Early on, what emerges is the difficulty of balancing the writing of negative items with preserving relationships with contacts, and how this is felt more acutely by sports journalists than news journalists: "News reporters are coming from a totally different angle. They'll just do a story – bang – and they might not speak to that person ever again or ever cover that subject ever again, whereas with sport you're coming back time and again" (p1). Later, this is referred to as an "emotional" dilemma rather than an ethical one. "So there are real, umm, they're not ethical problems, are they, they're more sort of emotional and, yeah, more emotive dilemmas really. It's like how tough do you want to get on someone when you've followed them all year long and, err, you know you're going to be dealing with them week in, week out?" (p3). Later, however, the participant says some journalists take their "duty of care" to subjects "too seriously", leading to extensive self-censorship. "Journalists can get very protective over their contacts and their relationships and sometimes I think to the detriment then of not reporting the full news... I think sports journalists probably protect them too much and a lot – a lot – of stories never see the light of day simply because sports journalists don't want to ruin their relationships. I think a lot, well, yeah, every week there's stories that never come out because of something or other" (p12). Again, slightly later in the interview: "They (sports journalists) are really reluctant to do anything that would spoil their contacts. Because so much now, because of all the barriers that are put up in front of you if you've got a good contact and you've spent time working on a contact you're really reluctant to jeopardise that by doing a news story" (p14).
- The participant views bans by clubs as a price worth paying for the preservation of credibility in fans' eyes. "So many times we got banned from there (Cardiff City) for asking those difficult questions and at first you think "Oh my God, how are we going to survive? They're one of our biggest sources of stories." And it's the same for all local papers. But you have to make a point and say, "No. We have to. Why? Well, for the readers." And if you're not asking those questions the readers will suss you out because they can see what's happening and they'll wonder, well, why aren't you asking those questions? And you are that connection between the fans, the readers and the club. So you have to ask the questions that you know people on the terrace would want to ask. Err, and also, I suppose, your own journalistic pride. You don't want to be seen as a sap for a club, do you, you want to be seen as someone who asks fair and tough questions and, you know, if you're ambitious as a journalist that's going to get you somewhere rather than just being written off, yeah, as a fan with a typewriter" (p4).



- The participant uses an interesting choice of word – “freedom” – when describing the difference between working for an agency/newspaper versus the BBC. “One of the big differences now joining the BBC from an agency was when you write for newspapers and agencies you’re granted an element of slight... a little bit of freedom. And it’s often in the way you couch a story, you know, the way you word it” (p1).
- Participant admits to having written transfer stories which he has known “probably won’t happen” and that he knows “three or four” freelancers who have deliberately fabricated stories out of financial desperation. “Have I written stories that I know probably won’t happen? Yeah. A lot. Working for the agency... There is a lot more pressure. And I guess if you are a freelancer as well, even more pressure. I mean, I’ve seen other journalists blatantly make up stories. But, because if they’re a freelancer they’ve got, you know, they’ve got a, they might have a wife and kid and family to look after. If you haven’t sold a story for a couple of days, I mean, I’ve experienced it at an agency when the pressure starts coming on and you haven’t written a story or you haven’t got a story in the paper. And I just think, thank God my, my, you know, I’ve got a bill to pay and I haven’t sold a story, because I was getting a regular income. Err, but I think for freelancers there’s a real pressure there to sell and to bend the truth” (p2). Further, other sports journalists have overlooked the falsehoods out of an appreciation of their peers’ financial need. “I think everyone sort of turns a bit of a blind eye because they just think ‘Well, you know, he’s got, he’s got to make ends meet’” (p2).
- Connected to the preceding point, the participant later admits that he has ghost-written columns for big-name former players in which he has never checked the details with the player or got the player’s approval for the copy – what might be termed opinion fabrication. While the participant sees these as “hard” things to do, he does not necessarily see them as wrong things to do. “I’ve written columns and through one reason and another – not through my own fault – the columnist never said a word of it, because maybe you just couldn’t get hold of them... it’s not because you’ve done anything wrong. So, for example, it might be Wales are playing a Test match on Saturday so you need to get [REDACTED] reaction, and [REDACTED] just not available, or [REDACTED] is not available. So what do you do? Well, you’ve got to get something, you know, they’re crying out for it. So you’ve just got to go with it and then you just give them a text and say, “Listen, this is what you’ve said” and pray that they don’t come back to you and say, you know. You’ve got to... those are probably the hardest things you ever write because essentially you’re writing the words of someone else who didn’t say a word of it. Err, and then there’s the pressure on them, you know, columns have to say something” (p19).
- Poor questioning by sports journalists can mean the truth does not emerge, and that superficial content is delivered instead, a point the participant emphasises by swearing. “I think at press conferences now the questions are getting worse and worse. And that means the answers are getting blander and blander... So if you just ask those same questions that everyone else is expecting you’ll get, exactly, the superficial answer that doesn’t really get to the truth at all... if you only ask the very obvious question you won’t get to the truth, and every story will be the bloody same” (p5).
- An increasing dependency on social media is making young sports journalists “lazier” and sedentary. “I fear that young journalists are getting lazy. Lazier. Part of that is to do with social media, that’s an element. I could see it, actually, with the journalists we were taking on at the agency. How their dependence on social media grew. The first few years before it was around guys would just, you know, they’d want to get out there – press conferences, they’d be taking numbers, asking for people’s phone numbers, ringing them up, working on the phones constantly. And then social media came in... I think there’s an increasing reliance on social media and the attitude “Well, the story will come to me.” And I think it’s really important that, err, wherever journalists – young journalists – start, whether it’s a university

or whether it's their first job, that they're told, "Right, don't solely rely on social media." The phone is used to call people as well as an avenue to Facebook and Twitter" (p6). Later, he connects the rise of social media to plagiarism and churnalism: "You've got a lot of, erm, plagiarism goes on now, I think. There's very little original content" (p9).

- Verifying the authenticity of material and social media accounts now presents "major questions and major dilemmas" for sports journalists (p10), with the participant providing an example of multiple Twitter accounts being in the name of a certain footballer. Later, this is then connected to the importance of sports journalists continuing to exercise traditional values of accuracy and fact-checking. "The core values remain always the same for journalists, possibly even more so now because we're relying on social media more for our stories so you need to be more vigilant, all the usual checks, all the fact-checking as you're writing" (p17).
- Codes of practice are viewed by the participant as "largely" irrelevant to sports journalists because their content is "just not controversial enough", although he acknowledges that the BBC's Editorial Guidelines have registered with him since joining the corporation (p6). There is also a tension in that many of the themes that arise during the course of the interview are controversial (e.g phone-hacking, the fabrication of stories, the perils of social media on reporting).
- The participant says that, while he did not know how to hack phones and was not aware of phone-hacking occurring on the sports team while he worked at the *News of the World*, he can conceive of himself having hacked phones if he had had the know-how. This, he says, would have been driven by the pressure to land stories. "There's pressure coming at you from above, from your editors, you know, you need to come up with stories, especially when you're working for a big title like that, you know, you're judged on, are you the sort of guy who finds stories?... I'm trying to think now if they've ever asked me about where a story came from. In the past, editors didn't really care where a story came from as long as it was true, you know, they'd say to you, "Is it right. You're not making it up?" "No." "Ok, let's run." You know, they didn't care where it came from. Erm, if I knew how to tap phones.... Oh. Hand on heart, I can't say that I wouldn't have and I could easily see myself that I would have done it, just because you want to make a name for yourself, you want to find a story, err, if the culture is there, other people are doing it then, yeah, why not? And let's face it, it wasn't just *News of the World* who were doing it, so. Umm, I can easily, easily understand how – why and how – journalists did that, yeah." (p10-11).
- Participant hints that economic censorship occurs, but "not a great deal" (p7).
- Clubs are more strident in their efforts to muffle sports journalists due to the changed power dynamic. This can lead to "bullying" by clubs, which in turn requires increased resilience from journalists. "Now increasingly clubs are taking so much in-house – they've got their own TV programmes, their own websites, their own newsletters, their own email list – they are seeing newspapers and the media as not so necessary, so they can possibly bully the journalists a bit more. Umm, and that's where we come back to, the journalists, you know, you can get a little bit bullied sometimes, although they'll try and bully you and that's where, as I said, you know, you've got to have a pair of, I won't say pair of balls because there's female reporters as well, but some guts to stick up for yourself" (p7-8). He later returns to the forcefulness of some press officers, with their being an underlying sense of adversarial interaction. The participant attributes mendacity to them, yet perceives them as a necessary evil to be negotiated. "Some press officers regard themselves as a barrier, like the guard dog at the gates... They just see their, they see their job as a barrier, they will lie, they will not tell you stuff, they'll deliberately block you, turn down any requests without even taking the requests to the coach or to the staff. Umm, so managing them has become almost as important as managing any other contact in sport because of that reason, because they can help you so much and they can make your life really difficult" (p12-13).

- The participant has some articulate points around how online audience analytics – “scoreboards on the wall” – have led to a sharp decline in coverage of some sports. There is shrinking coverage of some sports while big-name stars perceived as being good for hits receive increasing coverage. This occurs due to the pressure on journalists to get hits on their articles. Social media has, he believes, intensified this contraction of variety. “There are certain stories then that don’t get covered because it’s perceived that they won’t get any hits. So, for example, athletics. Athletics stories – athletics coverage – for example in Wales has plummeted, even though we have lots of great athletes, and we always have had great athletes... if you put an athletics story on it just doesn’t get the same sort of hits as a story about, erm, Dan Biggar or a story about Gareth Bale. But does that mean you should ignore it? No. You should, you should... athletics deserves that coverage and in a way then there’s a public service issue there. Sometimes, you know, you should sometimes write stories you know, look, this isn’t going to get a massive readership but we need to do our bit to cover it. And it’s sport, it’s cricket, whatever. But now media outlets just don’t bother. And in fact I know journalists who report, who do athletics, and are almost sneaking through athletics stories – sort of doing it on the side – because if they’d asked, “Look, I’m going to do this story,” they’d be told, “No, don’t do it. Waste of time. Do something else.” But then, as I said, athletics coverage dies. Same with cricket coverage... has social media improved the quality? No, not at all. Because if, if... the onus now is on quantity and getting hits. And it’s almost like you kind of know what you can do. Let’s put the word “Gareth Bale” in a story, in a headline. Let’s put “Gavin Henson” in a headline. “Dan Biggar”. “Alan Wyn Jones”. “Aaron Ramsey”. The story itself might be utterly crap. You know, there might be absolutely nothing in it. It might be regurgitated from, I don’t know, a week old, but it’s all about getting a name in a headline to get it to click. And, you know, suddenly, then this pressure comes on journalists as I said, where you’ve got like scoreboards on the wall and suddenly, you know, you’re talking this added pressure now of, err, are your stories getting any clicks and you’re now being judged by that?” (p8). It has also led to a decline in editorial standards, he claims somewhat exasperatedly, through “random” listicles with no editorial standards. It is as though in his eyes it is a form of anti-journalism: “And it’s also, you’ve seen this now, the increase in things like “Twenty best players who never played for Wales.” Or it will be some random number like 32 or 16 or 17 or whatever. Apparently there’s an optimum number, I think 17 or something. So that’s not because there’s any real value in it, it’s just because, right, we thought of eight or nine but now we need to come up with another 10 to get more clicks. Not really a particular editorial reason but just because they want to get more clicks. So there’s a lot of that sort of stuff going on. You know, the “Twelve players that Cardiff City should look to sign before...” I mean, why 12? Why? Are any of these 12 players – have they actually been linked to Cardiff? Are there any connections to the team? No. It’s just, let’s come up with 12 people just because we’re going to get 12 clicks. So, you know, then you come back to the ethics thing as well of, if you’re asked to do that – come up with 12 players that Cardiff City should sign before they go to the Premier League – well, what are you basing it on? It becomes totally random and not based on any sort of sound editorial or journalistic skill, just.. it’s almost plucking names out of a hat. So, does that do anything for journalism? Not at all” (p8-9).
- The participant views sports journalists as in many instances effectively scared of pursuing stories. And he believes many news journalists do not regard sports journalists as “journalists” per se; an interesting view given that the participant had just moved over to the news desk after years working as a sports journalist. “Sports journalists will invariably duck out of a news story... it’s understood you have an inside knowledge but are you regarded as a hard journalist? No, probably not. I think the journalists – the news journalists – probably wouldn’t regard the sports guys as journalists. I think they’re more regarded as

reporters. They're reporting what's happening, they're not regarded as digging out the news. And I think so there is an element of that I think, yeah" (p13).

- The participant says the cyclical, repetitive, diary-based nature of sports journalism ("your life becomes the season") is what prompted him to switch to news journalism. "It's very diary-based, isn't it sports journalism? And in fact one of the reasons, one of the reasons I've moved on now to news very recently is because I found it a little bit, that routine became very repetitive – that it was all based around diary. It was based around matches that are coming up, matches that are happening and matches that have just happened, err, and almost your life becomes the season. You can almost map out your next nine months according to the football and rugby season or sports season, whatever sport it is that you follow. Umm, yes, there aren't, there isn't enough investigative stuff done, but I think that comes back to the whole thing that sports journalists are so reluctant to do them" (p14). The aspect of covering games week in, week out is part of the job's fun but it can become a "treadmill", and he admits to a form of what, given his vocabulary, might arguably be termed burnout. "If you ask crap questions you get crap answers, and I was probably just getting a bit fatigued with it all and not... You need to be up and ready and at it and enthusiastic and you need to be 100 per cent because it is a treadmill, you know, it is routine. You literally go from one week to the next to the next, plodding on through the games, through the games. It's relentless, it is absolutely relentless... It's great fun but it's a real treadmill. And it's a repetitive treadmill" (p15).

## Interviewee 7 - Eta

### Transcript:

*[The interview begins slightly unusually in that the interviewee has begun to talk about matters pertinent to the interview before the interview has officially started. I therefore suggest to him that I start the recording so that his points can be captured.]*

TB: There we go.

Int7: Yeah, the period of time I was at *The News of the World* I remember, umm, feeling constantly under pressure to get stories. And after about a year thinking "I can't land the stories that they want me to land because I just don't know how to do it," because I thought, umm, my understanding of working contacts and kind of ringing people and just following my nose after stories, I thought had worked previously but didn't seem to be delivering the sort of size of stories that they were needing. And then it emerged that the phone hacking stuff started to coming to light, and then I started to realise that I wasn't landing a lot of the stories because I wasn't hacking phones. So that essentially brought me a bit of comfort, to be honest, even though it was awful what they were doing; from my own sense of worth and ability I realised I wasn't landing the stories they needed because I wasn't breaking the rules basically, so it was quite an unusual time.

TB: Well indeed, because that's very much regarded as a news desk phenomenon rather than a sports desk...

Int7: ...Yeah, yeah...

TB: ...And the Leveson Inquiry was focused on the news side of things rather than sport. I mean, as far as you were aware was it that kind of clear distinction? Was it very much a kind of news desk, news editor-led...

Int7: ...Well that's what, that's what it turned out to be. I mean, I might sound utterly naïve or stupid but I genuinely didn't know any mechanism for it to go on. It certainly wasn't, umm, ever discussed with us as sports reporters. But the fact was that they were getting stories about sportsmen and women quite a lot, you know. The higher profile you were, I mean, certainly the [REDACTED] story – was an interesting one because the cricket correspondent at the time, and I believed him, claimed not have known anything about the story. I mean, he subsequently went on to collect a couple of awards but his name was on the story as a joint by-line, umm, with a guy who subsequently went to prison for hacking. So, and I've spoken to [REDACTED] and I'm pretty sure he thinks he was hacked, umm, and that's the only way they could have found out what was going on, messages that were left on his voicemail and whatever he thinks were accessed to get that story. But, err. So, yeah, I mean, I never really kind of. I mean, in fact I would say, and I don't know, but I would be amazed if it wasn't employed in some way, shape or form, umm, around the [REDACTED] story. I would be staggered if they hadn't used that technique in some way. I've got no evidence whatsoever to say that they did but it would just be very surprising if they hadn't. But, umm. And that obviously crossed over the whole paper from the sports pages

to the front pages. I mean, it was about 10 pages at the front and four, five pages at the back, I think, when they ran the story, so. Yeah.

TB: So there's a sense that it was spilling over into sport and sports journalists maybe sometimes unwittingly...

Int7: ...Yeah...

TB: ... You say there the cricket correspondent was not even aware of stories going out there but his by-line being put on there. Was it a case of almost sports desks being unaware but being kind of caught up in it, as it were?

Int7: Well, I guess so. I mean, I'm, I'm genuinely just not that across how it all worked and whatever. I mean it was as much probably as much as the public, you know, the Leveson Inquiry and, err, kind of just hearing anecdotes that came out of the paper. But, umm, yeah I think the sports desk essentially... It was interesting, I mean the amount of times I remember you would get stiffed by the news desk, like, because as you know **working in sports journalism, you go back to the well, the same well, time after time after time, which is I think a major challenge of breaking big news stories as a sort of beat reporter,** if that makes sense. You know, because you go back into the room with the same people. And, umm, you know, unless someone ends up getting sacked or booted out of the sport as a result of stuff that you've written, umm, or reported on. **So you tread this constant tightrope between reporting what you know and what is interesting, and completely alienating yourself or alienating contacts or whatever.** So, but the amount of times you sort of, you know, delicately try and maintain a relationship or whatever or know there was a high-profile player or sportsman or whatever it was, who you had a relationship with, you'd be under pressure to maintain that relationship and kind of use that relationship in order to deliver stories. Umm, but then the front of the paper would just, you know, run a story that would just blow everything you'd ever done completely out of the water. And you just... I mean it happened several times, several times, with me and I bet you every, you know, but particularly football reporters, would tell you it happened and that, you know, a silly amount of times because footballers obviously have a profile that tabloid newspapers are very interested in, especially which makes news rather than just sports stories. So, that was a really frustrating scenario. And also just the sort of demand for headlines which, again, and this is a constant tension between reporters and guys on the desk, I suppose, who do write the headlines, 'cos that's the constant refrain from reporters: "I don't write the headlines." Well, it's true, you know, and often headlines would bear only a passing kind of, err, you know, they'd cherry-pick one line out of what has been said and out of context it can be quite misrepresentative so that was a frustration as well. I think probably of all the papers *The News of the World* and screaming headlines went hand-in-hand. So yeah, yeah, I think if you're part of the same organisation you try and pretend, you know, when you write as a sports reporter you kind of, you try and, especially if, I think it would be very interesting if you did a sort of straw poll across, umm, sports reporters and got their politics and kind of understood maybe like who they'd voted for, and then try and align that with the political position of the front of the paper. And I suspect, again, not on evidence but just anecdotally, I suspect you'd find a lot of sports reporters probably a bit further to the left than the front of their papers actually are. So there's that, you're part of the same organisation but you try

and slightly separate in your mind that you're working for people you might not necessarily have too much time for.

TB: So, there are a number of questions I've been going through with every interviewee, so I'll just run through a few of those. The first one is, in your experience, what do you think are the main ethical issues that confront sports journalists in the course of their professional practice?

Int7: Err, main ethical issues. Well, it's a good question. Umm. I mean, it might be a surprising one but 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, PRs, umm, that need to go back there and just not rock the boat. I mean the fear of sort of, umm, being ostracised in some way by writing stuff which is highly contentious and not necessarily, umm, sort of, if you're going against the grain of what most people are writing. I mean there's a certain irony, I suppose, that there is this pack mentality to journalism which I think is particularly clear in sports journalism, umm, where you do hear – and it comes generally, I think, a little bit more from less experienced journalists or less secure journalists – but “What's the line? What's the line?” And I think you shouldn't have to find the line by speaking to other journalists, you should write the line that you believe is there and, you know, if your editor gets cross because you don't have the same line as other people then either he doesn't trust you or whatever. But, umm, so I think, I'd say that – is that an ethical challenge or is that just a sort of professional challenge? But I think you can be compromised certainly in that regard. Erm, I mean clearly in things like cricket and, well, in most sports you have inside information – information that the general public doesn't have ahead of time, so there's clearly a risk involved or there must have been cases where journalists have used that information for gambling purposes, whatever – which would be another sort of ethical challenge. Yeah, and I just think it's, you know, you're there to pursue the truth, that's why you should be there, and that should (be) kind of come what may, really. Erm, but clearly that's, that's not always as easy as it sounds and 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.

TB: I was going to return to that point later actually about the issue of self-censorship by journalists, by sports journalists, but maybe just bring it in here. So what is the reason then for self-censoring in that way, of not publishing what you know to be true. Is it kind of self-preservation in terms of a career path?

Int7: Yeah, well I think it is. It's sort of, you know, you want to be accepted within the industry, within amongst your peers, amongst, umm. There is also I think an inherent tension between the fan in you, which it would be highly unlikely that you would end up in sports journalism if you weren't a sports fan to begin with, and then you kind of move – some more than others – into a journalistic role depending on the training you have and your sort of integrity and whatever it may be. People start, I mean, you know, one of the worst, most cringe-worthy things you can see in a press box is people cheering or clapping, you know, when someone scores a try or a goal or hits a six or whatever it is. It's awful to see, because you try and maintain a degree of sort of neutrality and impartiality and you should do. Umm, but the reality is that there, you know, you can't, I mean I've been quite

pleased actually when, I've not covered a huge amount of cricket in the last few years and I've watched cricket with my friends and my family in a way that I used to watch cricket. It's actually been really nice to just watch it and be a fan again, umm, because you do lose that part as a journalist. So, I guess what I'm saying is that you don't necessarily, you don't, you certainly don't want to attack the sport that you've grown up loving so I guess there can be a temptation to sort of try and present a rosier image than it is. And also just an inherent human instinct to be drawn more towards happier, less controversial sort of, umm, easier stories where you don't... You know, if you're constantly writing negative stories that are either hyper-critical of individuals or attacking organisations who run sport or whatever you're gonna get a lot of pushback, whether it be from administrators, PR people, the individual themselves, or you get alienated, or your peer group, other journalists, start to turn on you a bit. You know, you can – it's a very, very fine line. So I think it's almost, for the sake of a better expression, it's for the quiet life, really. Umm, writing highly controversial stuff all the time is quite challenging because you get a lot of challenges that go with it, whereas if you write... You know, for example, it's very rare you'll get a call from a communications person or a PR person if you've written a really good, positive piece that says everything's fluffy and lovely and the garden's green and everything's, you know, everything's wonderful. Once in a blue moon you'll get a call saying, "Thanks a lot for that great piece, that's really helped." You write a piece that's challenging, asking financial questions, revealing stuff about money or revealing stuff that people don't want out there – the interesting stories, the actual news stories which are not just extensions of a PR arm – then you will almost always get a phone call at, you know, 8 o'clock that morning or an email or somebody trying to make you, you know, trying to challenge what you've written. Umm, and that can be quite hard work, you know, especially if for example you wrote for a Sunday newspaper when your almost one day off a week is on a Sunday and you've written two or three stories and you're getting bombarded with calls at 8 o'clock in the morning. It's not ideal. Umm. But it does go with the territory. So, yeah, I think that's part, there's a sort of desire to protect the sport that you're covering, a sort of blurred line between the fan and the journalist, and just an understanding that the more controversial stuff you write – which is also the hardest stuff to get that information. It's very easy to get someone saying, "Everything's lovely, and there's no problems here, and thumbs up." But to get someone to give you enough information to write a really good news story is the hardest thing to do as a sports journalist. As any journalist, in fact. Yeah, it's basically a lot more work if you're going to write controversial stuff.

TB: In your own experience, working on [REDACTED], was that not an area where you knew you were going to be potentially ruffling feathers a bit?

Int7: Yeah, yeah, that was, yeah I did. I definitely did. I didn't realise how much, actually. I think I was quite surprised at how sensitive the authorities were to that. Umm, I assumed once all the stuff in the [REDACTED] started popping up and people began to grasp that, and also just the scale of the money that was involved in that pay-out, I assumed that everyone would just fall into line straight away. It was obvious, you know. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Some of us have, everyone's got a sort of sliding scale of what's tolerable and what's intolerable, and I think some of us who watch the sport feel the game has gone a bit too far. The attraction of the physical element is massively appealing to all of us who watch



it – it’s why I played. You like, you know, physical contact and that’s an exciting part of the sport, but I think, umm, I’d certainly noticed more and more, or I thought I was seeing more [REDACTED], and there were sort of three, a cluster of incidents. And then I started pressing the desk that we needed to write about it, and even people at the desk on [REDACTED] were pretty hesitant, you know. I know there was some pushback from the senior editor, the news editors, at the paper initially. Umm, and also just the fact it was a bit boring, you know. [REDACTED]. Who wants to read about that, you know. We’re a sports desk, you know, what the hell’s that got to do with us? But it was... yeah, you know, but I was determined from quite an early stage, I felt there was a problem and it was, sort of, once I’d started digging a bit beneath the surface and I started to believe there was a sort of – could I say a cover up? – but I definitely thought there was a wilful looking the other way from sports authorities. And I felt they were listening to people who were telling them what they wanted to hear rather than what they needed to hear, and that was also more evident the more I started speaking to sort of senior [REDACTED]. Umm, it was a real strong, like, “Back off, don’t go there” sort of thing which, there’s a little bit of my character that people who know me quite well that I quite like that, you know, let’s roll our sleeves up and have a metaphorical fight. But I don’t, you know, if I think someone’s bullshitting or, umm... I think as a journalist you should, essentially, if someone’s telling you “Don’t look here,” you should always look there – as a good rule for any young journalist, because if they’re saying “don’t look there” there’s a reason they don’t want you to look there, umm, and a lot of people were saying don’t, don’t open that box essentially. So, I did, sort of, I did know it was going to rattle some cages, yeah. I felt a few cages needed rattling probably. It was quite interesting reading [REDACTED] release about [REDACTED] yesterday. Did you see that?

TB: No, I didn’t see that.

Int7: So [REDACTED] ... I will, I should go back to it and I will at some point, but they’re going to basically make [REDACTED]. I’m not quite, I don’t think the release really explained how it was gonna help them as such, but there was a quote in there from someone at [REDACTED] who I won’t name but who said, [REDACTED] and the amount of people who’ve claimed to have “led the way” on, you know, [REDACTED]. Particularly from within the sports who I know damn well were utterly against what we did at [REDACTED] for a good long time. Until they saw which way the wind was blowing and sort of started to move and language changed. I revisited an interview I did – I transcribed the whole interview – because I knew at the time it was something I was going to need to be able to reference back to. And it was again someone – a very senior [REDACTED] – and just the change in their position over the last five or six years has been pretty significant, I’d say, moving to an acceptance that there’s now enough evidence to associate [REDACTED], you know, which I think they massively played down for a long time, and accused us of sensationalising it. I mean, bizarrely at a [REDACTED] forum that they held a few months after we started that campaign, umm, I spoke to [REDACTED], who’s been on the record previously as saying that

██████████ towards the tail-end of his career, and he said there was one period where he, I think, he said he got ██████████. Played every single week, came back, ██████████. And so I thought he'd be a natural ally of the ██████████, but he was very, very hostile towards it. And it was actually one of the only times in my life I've turned the tape off during an interview because it just wasn't going anywhere, because he wouldn't answer any of the questions. Every question he thought I was asking he thought I was trying to trip him up, or get a headline, or whatever. And, umm, what he said was, "What you're doing is ██████████, you're attacking the sport, your sensationalising stuff, you don't know anything about it." He was saying it as a guy who's, as I said, I assumed would be massively behind what we were trying to do. So, lots of people in ██████████ saying "You're attacking the sport." Umm, my brother still jokes about it now. I think he made a joke at my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday, "Ohh, you've ruined that sport, which one are you going to go and ruin next?" Just this sort of idea that by presenting, taking a position which in my view was more about people's ██████████, and a kind of recognition that the sport had perhaps gone a little bit too far and needed a kind of check and a balance on it, was seen as a direct attack on the sport. And that certainly wasn't what I ever expected it to be. But, err, yeah, it flagged up quite a few, caused quite a few challenges, yeah, definitely.

TB: So a related question there is, do you think sports journalists have duties, and if they do have duties to whom do they owe those duties? In the course of that work was there a sense of you feeling, you know, obligated to pursue it on behalf of certain people?

Int7: It's a good question. Umm, I definitely don't think we have a duty to be an extension of governing bodies' PR departments. I think they pay them enough and also clubs' PR departments. I don't believe sports journalists should be PR people. I think we naturally play that role anyway because, you know, most stuff is positive and there are lots of good stories in there that are just good, positive stories. And that, by definition, is essentially promoting the sport. So, we're covering the matches, we are writing big interviews – the majority of stuff that people write would be seen as a sort of pushing the sport out to a wider audience. But I don't think it's our duty to do that. I think, I mean you've got a duty to your desk, I suppose, the people who employ you to, umm, provide them with good content essentially. Umm, but do we have a duty to anyone else? I mean, not really I don't think. Everyone's trying to make a living aren't they, so, umm, I think you've got a duty to your family but, err, no. No, I don't think so. I don't see why you should feel... I mean, just for your professional integrity I think you've got a duty to pursue the truth and what you believe to be where the evidence is and certainly I felt with ██████████ there was enough evidence to start putting it out there, especially with, umm, what had come out in the ██████████ and the ██████████ which was being presented, which hadn't been seen before by sports reporters because I think we'd always fallen into the trap of just buying what was being put in front of us – spoon-fed to us – rather than challenging data and information. And it's quite dry, isn't it? Things like the ██████████ take a little bit of ploughing through. But, so, perhaps you have a, perhaps a duty to the people playing? I've felt a duty perhaps to the players involved, who I didn't think were getting given enough of the counter-arguments to what ██████████ were telling them. I'm not sure everyone would feel that, I don't know.

TB: You mentioned there about the importance of pursuing the truth. What other, or what do you think are the most important ethical qualities that sports journalists should have? Is that commitment to the truth paramount as it is to other journalists? Or are there other qualities that you think are important?

Int7: Umm, I don't think it's... I think, if I'm honest, I think the other – certainly news desks – laugh at the sports, or not laugh at, but I think, I think there's probably a view from other parts of the media that, umm, sports journalism is more PR than journalism. Umm, but I think the really good news reporters, sports news reporters and... some of the best stories. I mean it was really interesting at the SJA (Sports Journalists' Association) awards last year how many public interest, big public interest, stories were actually the ones getting the awards and getting the recognition – talking about Daniel Taylor's stuff with child sex abuse in football; stuff that the *Telegraph* have done which I think was very much

Some of Martha Kelner's work in cycling and Matt Lawton. They're kind of big ethical stories about cheating, it's about abuse, it's about the cross-over between real-life and sport, and this sort of weird scenario in sport where people, because people use it as an escape, people turn on *Match of the Day* and they switch off work and all the serious stuff that's going on in life. Sport is something that people go to as a means of escape, you sort of, I think quite a lot of people don't want to accept that there's a sort of... they're not just actors on a stage – the people that are taking part. And also there's a sort of cross between professionalism and amateurism and, you know, children participating in sport who could be predated on by wicked people. Umm, merging that world with *Match of the Day* is difficult, it's difficult for a lot of people. But it's also, you know, an incredibly important story that Daniel Taylor started, which began this huge avalanche of evidence which was almost too big to comprehend – the scale of football clubs particularly, but who knows? I mean that set a chain of events going where every single sport had to look at their own, umm, child protection policies and stuff like that. But it was such a massive story, umm, it was almost overwhelming. And it was so grim that, you know, a lot of people got turned away from it because they couldn't stay with it. And, you know, there are a few comparisons with the concussion stuff as well, because there's like how many times could you tell the story of this guy's going through hell, or women or man, you know suffering these horrible symptoms, they're scared of the future, it's changed their personality. It was quite hard stuff and you're talking about – it's not stuff I thought I would be writing about when I became a sports journalist. And it's quite hard for fans. I mean, I was always interested in those kind of stories when I was reading sports pages when I was younger, but I know not everyone is, and a lot of people just want, they just want to be told that everything's great and [laughs] it's all fine, but there are consequences to playing sport and there are some bad people involved in sport just as there are some fantastic people, well I think there's more fantastic people. But it's a cross-section of society isn't it, so you're gonna get some wrong uns.

TB: So in the course of their work and, in your own personal experience, in the course of your work as well, what do you think's informed your approach? The values you've taken, the stories you want to pursue, the angles you've taken? Where do sports journalists get their values from, do you think? Is it something that comes from the desk, is it a personal thing?

Int7: I think it has to be a personal thing. I think, umm, I mean for me I grew up playing rugby and played mini-rugby from the age of five and played at school, played at university, played when I was in the Army, played sort of everywhere. I absolutely loved playing rugby. But I also played at a time, so I'm 40 now, so in '95 I was in the process of leaving school, eyeing up what I was going to do next and thinking about what I was going to do next, and the game went professional. And I don't think I was good enough to play professionally, or perhaps I realised quite early on what it would entail to actually become a professional. But, umm, I certainly knew quite a lot of guys who did turn professional who are my age and who I'd played a lot of rugby with, and when I ended up actually getting injured when I was 22 and having to be told basically you can't, you're done here – this sport isn't for you – I ended up going into journalism, and I had a really good way into professional rugby clubs because I knew quite a lot of guys on a personal level, not just as a journalist or whatever. And so I always felt I had a sort of, I always felt I was looking at it a little bit from the players' perspective, and I knew, like, the more I was in the game, the more I learned about the sport, the more I learned about it was that to be a professional – you know, again, the kind of glossy, glamorous external image that a lot of people think, "Oh, being a professional sportsman, what an overwhelmingly glamorous, amazing life that is." I started to sort of quite quickly realise it was quite a lot more relentless and sort of, umm, more difficult. The training element of it, dealing with injuries – I think because I'd undergone quite a lot of surgery myself playing rugby I sort of maybe understood a bit more what that means when you're told "Right, you've got to have surgery," and you're out for six months or longer, what that process entails. So I always looked at it, tried to write from a player's perspective, and I think a lot of journalists get a lot of their information from maybe administrators and people who maybe have more of an interest in presenting... maybe, you know, "player welfare is the number one priority". We've all heard it a million times; it's a little bit hollow. But, yeah, what am I trying to say? Essentially, I've tried to look at the game through a player's eyes a little bit more, and that's what's sort of tried to guide... you know, I think a lot of the time professionals in any sport are bound by contracts and a need to not be seen as a troublemaker, so it's very, very hard for a professional sportsman, I think particularly those who are in a team environment, to kind of flag up malpractice or, umm, issues which are essentially, you know, they know are a problem but they don't want to be seen as, yeah, the troublemaker, the person who speaks out. And that's why I've been a bit, well, I'd say very, disappointed with [REDACTED] issue, because I think they had a great opportunity about four or five years ago to become a much more significant player in the sport actually, with a bigger voice than they have, but I think they were scared of, umm, biting the hand that feeds them. [REDACTED], and I think there were, well, I know for a fact that there were conversations that were had along the lines of: "We fund you, remember that." (Laughs.) You know, people could read into that what they would, but, yeah, there was a definite [REDACTED]. And also just a sort of fear that, you know, litigation would take hold and there'd be a legal threat and obviously the amount of money involved in the [REDACTED] was and is so vast it's kind of hard to comprehend – you're talking the best part of a billion dollars. Obviously, [REDACTED] could never sustain that sort of number, but as it turns out I don't think – because of the way the legal system is structured in the UK – I don't think that sort of, umm, class action suit will ever happen. So, yeah.

TB: In the course of your work do you ever have much recourse to the Editors' Code of Practice or regulatory codes? Does that loom large at all for you or sports journalists more generally?

Int7: I don't think, I genuinely don't think it looms large. I think it's, it's definitely more – people are more aware of it than they have been. Umm...

TB: What accounts for that?

Int7: Well, just because you get, I think there's more legal checks and balances on stuff now than there was. Again, that's another reason why people steer clear of writing contentious stuff, because they're worried about legal issues and, err, I mean post-Leveson it's just more out there, you know, and I think certainly staff reporters are all briefed very clearly and expected and required to come in and listen to talks about codes of practice and what have you. Freelancers probably less so I think, but, umm, yeah, it's, it's known about but it doesn't sort of dictate everything you do by any stretch of the imagination. Essentially, if you're writing stuff that you know to be true and which you can stand up with enough hard evidence then as a general rule you shouldn't have anything to worry about, really, in terms of any kind of legal recourse. I mean, I've had one scenario where I was very critical of one individual medical person who was very, very well backed by legal – I probably have to be a bit careful even saying who it was. He was working for an organisation which had a massive legal team, basically, and was incredibly well-funded and, umm, did we publish an apology? We published a correction. He tried to call us out on about seven or eight different things and he got me on a technicality. I had – was it misrepresentative? – it was technically correct what they were saying; we didn't pay but he was asking for a lot of money. We didn't pay any of it and stood our ground quite rightly, but, umm, yeah, you have to obviously be wary of legal cases.

TB: So, just changing tack a bit now, the rise of digital technology, social media, what impact do you think that's had on the content of sports journalism, both in terms of the amount out there and the quality of it?

Int7: Well, I think it's certainly demanded an increase in turnaround, as in the speed of turning things around. People now watch a game and pretty much as they're, if they've been at the match they'll wanna click on their phone on the bus home or as they're walking out of the ground, and they want a report now, you know. So the speed of what you need to turnaround has massively changed. I mean, friends of mine who are more senior in the game will tell you that they might have gone on a tour 20, 25 years ago and they'd ring the desk on a Friday and say, "Yeah, I'm gonna be at the game tomorrow," and then they'd file a match report, however long, after the final whistle down the phone. And then they'd basically hit the golf course for four or five days. So, umm, you know, there was a) far less demand because there was finite space in a paper and therefore you could only give them so many words. Now there is an infinite amount of space on the web and therefore some newspaper websites, I think massively to their detriment, have gone down the path of: we will essentially put anything up if it's content. And I remember, I remember having a conversation with quite a young chap, umm, when I was working at [redacted] who

said during a big tournament, "Send us whatever you have, we'll literally publish anything." They just wanted content, content, content. And that's because, especially in the earlier days – and I think this is changing, as we touched upon before we put the tape on – but I think there was this, "Hits, it has to be hits. Hits, hits, hits, hits," no matter what they were hitting, the quality. I remember a guy at *The Independent* a long, long time ago, but he was told by his desk, "You have to get Danny Cipriani into the intro of this piece, regardless of whether he's the main player, anything, just get his name into the intro because it gets hits online." And that's clearly distorting your impartiality, distorting your journalistic judgement. So I think, yeah, the speed, therefore by definition probably the quality of what you're writing is going to be challenged. You know, if you're filing copy on the whistle, as we call it, it's very, very hard to get anything other than what we call running copy, which is just X passed to Y and Y passed to Z and Z scored the goal or scored the try. Umm, I think really good match reporting is a combination of that but really incisive comment, detail of information, telling the reader stuff they didn't already know. Umm, and I think the best match reports in any sport have a real punch to them which is very, very hard – and a sort of attitude to them – which is really hard to generate while you're watching a game. You need a bit of time, you need to be able to reflect a little bit. So I think that's changed enormously and I think, yeah, just the volume – for certain organisations – the volume of content that's expected to be generated has changed dramatically. Umm, because as I said you've as much space as you want. And also, I mean, things like social media have completely changed the relationship between journalists and readers, for the better and for the worse. There are some really good interactions on social media, there are some pretty ordinary ones as well. Umm, yeah, you can certainly get a fair bit of stick although I'm probably quite lucky not to work in football, where there's a lot more vitriol I think directed at journalists and tribalism which makes it really hard to, umm – if you're critical of a team then you're being, people feel like they're being personally attacked I think in football, maybe you don't quite get that same scenario in rugby. Umm...

TB: And that rise of social media, does that present different professional or ethical challenges to what you had prior to social media being on the scene?

Int7: Different professional challenges...

TB: ... Well, I mean, just in terms in some of the kind of professional qualities like we mentioned earlier about pursuing the truth, being honest. Maybe with social media, you mentioned there about the vitriol that's maybe more directed at football journalists. You know, as a journalist maybe are we duty-bound if we have an honestly held informed opinion about something we should be free to express it. And does social media inhibit that?

Int7: Possibly, I think what it does do, I think that demand for speed all the time, it restricts a reporter's ability to go to multiple sources. Because if all the desk are interested in – and again there's this conflict between and tension between online desks at newspapers and the print arm, and the daily and the Sunday arms, they are all different beasts in a way. And in many ways Sunday newspaper reporting, which is, again, a sort of dying art form in many ways, but that idea that the Sunday papers sort of set the agenda and inform the news landscape for the week or certainly the start of the week, is slightly fading away. And sorry

to say the disappearance of *The News of the World* has been a big factor in that, or a factor in it, let's say. Umm, but as journalists are expected to work across platforms – online, daily, Sunday – there's much less of an opportunity for people to take their time to actually delve really deep into issues and go to multiple sources and speak off the record to people and kind of gather the big picture – paint the whole picture rather than little, small bits of it. And, umm, yeah, I think that time pressure is massively responsible for, in a negative way, towards, err... I guess the proliferation of fake news, I guess, where you just put something out there and it's just, it's a thing, it's just, it's almost... Yeah, I read somewhere recently that untrue stories go viral far quicker than true stories – I don't know where I've pulled that from – but essentially what I'm trying to say is that if you really want to get to the nub of a story and really understand a story you need to speak to more than just one talking head who says something about it. You need to speak to lots of people, you know, in order to do that you need time. Certainly I was very fortunate at [redacted], who's the sports editor, once she started to kind of understand the impact that [redacted] was having, she'd just say to me, "Go away for a few days," basically, don't feel you need to check in with us and just, you know, go off and do the work you're doing and then come back to us and tell us what you've got, essentially. I don't think many people get that sort of privilege anymore. So, yeah, it's had a massive effect. I'm not sure too many journalists would tell you that the online world has improved their ability to deliver a good, thoroughly researched story. That's my view. [Coughs and asks whether I want a cup of tea.]

TB: So have you ever in the course of your work, have you ever felt that you could be in danger of having broken the law or breached an ethical code? Or, if not you personally, have you ever been aware of a sports journalist breaking the law or committing a breach?

Int7: I've certainly, I'm pretty certain I've never, ever thought I was breaking the law. Umm...

TB: The context of me asking this is very much – it's not a personal accusation – it's more about, you know, we started off the conversation – the interview – with a reference obviously to phone hacking...

Int7: ... Yeah, sure...

TB: So it's, I wonder whether, you know, in the context of having worked with some of the tabloids who may have been at the sharper end of practice...

Int7: ... Yeah, yeah, yeah...

TB: ... whether you've come across maybe instances of colleagues or being aware of chatter about...

Int7: ... I think the one area I would say there is potentially an issue is gambling space. That is a risk, clearly it's a risk, especially when you look at things like real-time betting and, as I say, insider information and, you know, journalists sitting in front of laptops – you can get on to spread betting sites, whatever. I think that is a risk. I don't absolutely know, I haven't witnessed it personally but there are certainly, there have been some rumours around the place, perhaps. But, umm, yeah, I think that would be an area I think where there's, I think I



touched upon in the ethical challenges part earlier on. But other than that, obviously, I mean, any story which involves anything which is going to be essentially accusing somebody of wrongdoing or malpractice or cheating – whatever it is – from financial impropriety to medical malpractice to, umm, use of performance-enhancing drugs, you know, all be very heavily lealed – go through the legal teams at the newspapers, who’ve got a pretty good and robust understanding of libel law and what have you, and, you know, I’ve had stuff, I’ve had lawyers come back to me and say basically “You can’t write that, we don’t have enough evidence to write that.” And therefore it doesn’t get printed. And quite rightly so, you know, that’s – there should be a robust and thorough legal vetting of any content that gets put out there. Yeah, but in answer to your question I’ve never, ever thought I’m breaking the law by doing this. I know on occasion I’ve sailed pretty close to the wind and lawyers have pulled me back into line in terms of things like media law, I suppose – legal challenges essentially where if they’d published what I’d written then the newspaper would be, and I would be, under threat of being sued, effectively.

TB: Did that have a chilling effect on you, once you got knocked back by the lawyers? In the future when tackling other stories did you think, well, maybe I won’t pursue that because I’ll only be knocked back by the lawyers?

Int7: Well yeah, I guess that sort of comes back to the initial, well, the earlier parts of what we were talking about, which was sort of why people don’t go after those stories or as much as they would otherwise, or should do. Because, yeah, you know, when you start getting phone calls from lawyers your life becomes a lot more complicated, you know. File a piece by a player saying “Yeah, big thumbs up, the garden’s rosy,” it just means you’re not going to get a call the next morning, or you’re not, you know. Yeah, inevitably it does, it will do, because people don’t want stress in their lives all the time and, umm, so you steer from stuff which is going to cause that potentially. But, yeah, I think the best journalists should have a sort of doggedness and a willingness to, yeah, accept that that is part of the job sometimes and, you know, don’t get me wrong, I think a lot of good journalists and reporters get a little bit of a buzz out of it potentially because they want to feel like they’re in the thick of things.

TB: Do you?

Int7: Ah, sometimes. I think, umm, I mean I got a buzz definitely when I [REDACTED] [REDACTED] basically got that story a day before everyone else. I mean I knew there was stuff, I knew there was stuff going on at the paper because I’d had a couple of odd requests about to get players’ agents’ numbers and just I’d had more contact from the news desk than I had ever previously. So I knew they were on to something, but I basically got called into the... I was cricket correspondent at the time and I got called into the office on the Saturday afternoon of the [REDACTED] – when was that, 2010? – [REDACTED] and I was told that I needed to take [REDACTED] who was our columnist. “Get him to the office.” It was like 12 o’clock in the afternoon, [REDACTED]. “Come to the office, bring [REDACTED] and don’t let anyone see you leave the press box.” And I was like. [Laughs.] Umm, and I basically, so I had to tell [REDACTED] that we needed to go into [REDACTED] to, err, go and meet the editor. I thought initially I was going to be sacked and then I was like, as we smuggled [REDACTED] out of the box and jumped in a cab with him out the back,



and then the penny dropped. I was like, "I think we've got..." and I was going to say "[redacted] story here" and he just went like that [makes shush gesture] because he'd worked out something massive was going on, and we sort of... anyway. We sat down with [redacted], and he showed us these tapes with the editor and the sports editor at the time, and I was absolutely, my heart was pounding, it was sort of pretty – I knew this was a massive story. And then the sports editor said, "You've got two hours. I need a thousand words. Make it the best fucking piece you've ever written in your life." And I was just like, bloody hell. That was a buzz, you know. Err, going into [redacted] the next morning, which normally you might find a couple of copies of [redacted] in the whole bloody place – everyone seemed to be carrying a copy of [redacted]. Sky Sports on the desk the next morning, you know, everyone had copies of [redacted] [laughs], I looked up at the changing room and the [redacted] players and the coach, like, staff all had copies of [redacted]. It was the only show in town. That was the weirdest [redacted]. [redacted] won and, you know, people were shaking hands, I mean that was a massive story for weeks afterwards. It was a huge buzz. I remember, yeah, [redacted] said to me, and he was going on TV, radio and I was as well – I was up at five in the morning constantly going on different media platforms – and he said, "Just ride the wave, ride the wave." And, you know, we were ahead of that story for weeks, because we were just getting great information. But again there was a lot of pressure, there was a time where – well, I did get the story but we decided not to run it, but that's another story – but essentially we didn't put it in the paper when we should have done, and my boss got heat from the top of the paper and I then got a mouthful down the phone in a hotel room in Leeds, where I was waiting to cover [redacted] the next day. It was, yeah, and after a while I was, like, bloody, I just want it to go away now [laughs]. So it's a buzz but it's also quite waring and, you know, but definitely feeling like you're setting the agenda is a good thing I think for a journalist, and that's what you should be doing really. Umm, but it's also like the tall poppy syndrome isn't it? You're there to get knocked down, and also, umm, when other reporters don't have the stuff to write that you do there can be a natural tendency to downplay that stuff, you know, whether it be to their own desks or to each other, that's just natural. I've done it, you know. You don't want another, somebody else's story to be as big as it might be because it essentially means you haven't got it and there's always an inevitable, you know. I think we have a lot of respect for each other, especially in rugby, I think there's a brilliant camaraderie among the rugby reporters and overwhelmingly people get on really well. And there's always like a kind of mixed feeling when you see that someone else has got a story, because there's a bit of you that's like "Good on them, well done for getting the story," but there's also a bit of you that's like "Bollocks, I didn't get it," you know, and I think, particularly on the daily beat, that's a constant challenge. You're sort of imagining what the guys on the desk are saying about you not getting the story or whatever. And when you do get a story you're always taking a hopefully educated risk – you know, if you're saying this is happening, breaking an exclusive news story. If it then doesn't happen or it's shown to be wrong then you look stupid, don't you? We've all written stories which we absolutely believed to be true at the time – perhaps were true at the time – and then events took over and that didn't happen, and then people can retrospectively say "Well, that story was rubbish," when actually based on the information that you had and what was happening at that point it was correct. But, as I say, it gets overtaken. It's a constant challenge.

TB: Yeah. You referred to this a little bit earlier – about maybe pleasing press officers and communication managers. What kind of an influence do they have on your practice? Do you regard them as a huge inconvenience, do you ignore them...

Int7: ... Basically, yeah. [Laughs] Not all of them, that's not fair. I think a lot, I think there's some really, really poor operators in rugby who are, umm, in thrall to the coaching staff, the players, they kind of hero worship. They don't do the job that they should be doing on behalf of their employers, the sponsors who pay good money to promote the sport, push it out there, and there's a sort of inherent sort of... I mean, there's been some really, really bad press officers in rugby, I'm afraid to say. There have been some excellent ones unquestionably, some really good ones, but I'd say there are fewer of them than there are average ones.

TB: But do they at all influence what you produce?

Int7: Yeah, I think so, yeah. I mean, they do, that's their job. I mean, I think you have to be very, very careful what you're listening to and understand why people are saying it and what their own job role is, you know. And the best ones, you'd say, the ones who are best at doing their job are the best ones that influence what gets put out there. If you're paid a lot of money by a big organisation to improve communications, what are you essentially doing? You're looking to protect the image of that organisation and essentially in any way you can influence the media to present that organisation in a positive light. So journalists need to be really careful about that, umm, but also they can be good sources of information if you understand that a lot of that information that you're getting is skewed. But, you know, from a very purely functional sort of way they can be fairly helpful just by, umm, arranging access – they're gatekeepers in a way, and again that's where you can be compromised as a journalist, as a sports journalist, because you know that access is king really, especially in a quotes-driven culture, which a lot of newspapers have fallen into the trap of kind of being obsessed with 'man says something', you know, which I always, well, it's not very rare that you read an interesting interview, but certainly spoon-fed kind of quotes pieces are generally not that interesting. Umm, but a lot of desks are obsessed, you know, with having quotes-driven stories and therefore if you lose that access, and press officers at rugby clubs for example, certainly football clubs, have the ability to certainly reduce the access that you get, you have to keep them sweet to a degree. But, err, generally they are a bit of a pain in the arse to be honest, yeah.

TB: So, in the past sports journalists have sometimes been referred to as belonging to the toy department of news organisations...

Int7: ... Yeah...

TB: ... being fans with typewriters...

Int7: ... yeah, yeah, yeah...

TB: ... that kind of thing. Any merit in that now, do you think?

Int7: Err, yeah, to a, I mean, yes. I think fans with typewriters, you know, that's a trap you have to avoid falling in to, and I think and if you, you know, we all know reporters – other sports journalists – who always go for the soft line. You know, I think one of the things you least want to be referred to as a sports reporter is you're a cheerleader – "They're a cheerleader." Essentially, you're just on the sidelines cheering your team on or cheering, and I really think readers see through that, especially the more kind of informed, sophisticated sports fans who are looking for, they want information about the sport and I think it's just reading platitudes the whole time. As I say, some people do want it and there is a certain audience which just wants to constantly be reassured everything's fine. It's, umm, it's a massive mistake I think to fall, a trap to fall into as a reporter, to just feel like you should always, you just want to write cheery stuff all the time, because it's just not reality. And, err, yeah, I'm pretty sure I wouldn't be someone people would say is a cheerleader but you certainly don't want to be. I mean, I got funnily enough actually [laughs] – maybe it's a sign I'm getting old and I don't want the battle – but I got a piece sent back to me about six weeks ago. No, actually, it must have been towards the end of last season, but it just went, "First, rewrite the first six paragraphs, this is too gushing by miles," or something, and basically I'd got a bit maybe, you can get a little bit accustomed to particularly players just being a bit guarded and wary and not, you know, they're doing the interview but they don't really want to do it and it's part of the job but it's a bit they'd rather not, and I totally understand that, I completely understand why sportsmen and women do not want to – they don't wanna get a headline, you know. Someone like Alastair Cook in cricket, who's a lovely guy, he's just horrified by the idea of his name being next to a headline. But I'd interviewed someone who was just so unbelievably friendly and sort of they wanted to do the interview and they were like asking questions about journalism and I was completely bowled over by it, and maybe that was what he was trying to do, I guess. But I wrote a piece which was essentially, I thought this bloke was going to be a pillock but he was actually an absolute star. Like, what you see on the pitch is nothing like what you get off the field, but it just became a bit of a fluffy PR piece, basically, and when my editor sent it back saying it's basically shit [laughs] I sort of reflected for a bit and thought, yeah, that's probably fair comment, you know [laughs]. Fawning. There's a red card system in the rugby journalists which is quiet right, where if anyone is seen to be what we call fawning over a player or coach they get given the red card and that should forever be thus. [Laughs.]

TB: Do you think there's potentially too much of a reliance by sports journalists on the sort of merry-go-round of press conference, press conference, match, press conference?

Int7: Definitely. Yep. A hundred per cent.

TB: It was interesting what you were saying about the "quotes-based culture".

Int7: Yeah, no, I think that's a big problem, I really do, and the trouble is we all know it but... It's like, there's nothing more, it's really hard maybe, it sounds like moaning about what is essentially an unbelievably brilliant job to do – it is amazingly privileged, you know, we get to see so much great stuff. Umm, but going to I think particularly to cover England in big tournaments where there's this machinery of PR and communications and marketing control around the team, where everything's embargoed, you know. You get little chunks where you maybe sit down with a player for 10 minutes and you've got a group of

journalists sat around you who've all... It's just quite a relentless treadmill of sort of just words being said. You know, there's no real.. they'll just be thrown away. It's like pieces which just get forgotten tomorrow. "Bloke says something about something else." You know, especially in those big tournaments, the players don't want to say anything controversial and they've been briefed to within an inch of their lives about what they can and can't say, you know so they always err on the side of caution. It's very, very rare you get a really, really explosive or dynamite interview there. And because you've got 10 or 12 or 14 of you sat round, you've all got a different line you're wanting to pursue and it just doesn't... Yes, it feels quite claustrophobic and I think it's anathema to kind of real, investigative journalism and really good quality journalism. And actually, I mean someone who's done exceptionally well in this sports news space in recent times has been Lizzy Ammon, Elizabeth Ammon, at *The Times* and their cricket. And where she's done so well, I think, is she's gone to places that other journalists haven't been, and I think in cricket in particular there's this very comfortable bubble that you can live in as a journalist which is like in the press boxes which are very comfortable in every sense. You're well-fed, given massages paid for by the ECB would you believe, umm, you've got nice, comfortable seats to sit in, everything's air-conditioned, you don't have to interact with the riff-raff of the crowd and, you know, I say that in a tongue in cheek way, but there's basically very little reason to leave that space. And I think that's quite dangerous because it means you don't actually speak to people on the ground, and I think where Lizzy broke the mould a little bit is that she was going around the county grounds and speaking to chairmen and people on the boards of counties, very different. You know, just working contacts basically and she's got some brilliant stories in the last four or five years, and probably ruffled more feathers in cricket than any other cricket reporter, and that's credit to her, I'd say. She pissed a lot of people off but she's written some brilliant stuff. The only stories worth writing, they say, are ones people don't want out there, and that's, yeah, so by definition once you write a good story you've written something that's probably gonna piss someone off somewhere.

TB: Yeah. Just at the latter stages of the interview now, just shifting the focus slightly. How do you regard your – as the growth of social media and the digital era – has it changed your sense of what it is to be a sports journalist? The way you go about your work, the way you maybe see yourself as distinct from the audience. Has it had an impact?

Int7: Err, I don't know to be honest. I hadn't really thought about that. Umm, I'm not very good on Twitter, I don't think I've ever struck the right balance between just ranting a bit and having very, very frivolous conversations which most people aren't interested in. But I think, I don't know. I still primarily see my role as the copy that I write for my desks. In that sense it hasn't changed much. I guess, yeah, you interact in different ways with the reader, but, no, I don't. How long was I? I wasn't really doing it much before social media came about so it was probably only like, I was probably only – I started in 2004. Probably only four years. I think I joined Twitter maybe early 2009 or something around then. So maybe five years. And then I was so wet behind the ears I don't think I was thinking about things like how does my reader perceive me or anything like that. My reader, my readers. It probably was only a reader than – my dad! Umm, but err, that's a terrible answer to your question but I can't really, not really.

TB: Maybe this connects with the time pressures that you referred to earlier – the appetite for the speed at which copy has got to be turned around now – but do you see what you do now as a sports journalist as a trade, or a profession, or a craft? How do you approach your work like that and see the industry?

Int7: I think it's a, I mean it's a career. As a craft? Yeah, you know, it's definitely. I think back to a couple of pieces that stand out which I've been proud of, as in I know that they've read – the prose worked and it's flowed and the subject matter. I remember a piece I wrote and I remember – this sounds pathetically dramatic – but I did, I think I wrote it and then burst into tears afterwards, which I've probably done on other occasions because the stuff's been so bad that I've written. But it was a piece I was incredibly proud of because it was another piece that probably, umm, I had to push quite hard to get them to publish it. And, umm, you know, it was such an incredibly powerful story and I think – I hope – I did it justice in the way that I could. So that was something I felt was a piece that I'd crafted and, yeah, was proud of. But essentially, you know, it is a job. I think it's a great job, it's one that we're very lucky to be involved in, but it's, yeah, a job and it pays the bills doesn't it? And I think it's probably harder now – well, it's definitely harder for the next generation coming through – to turn it into something that does pay the bills, because the bills have gone up and the salaries have stayed the same, or hardly gone up at all. I think it's probably as hard now, as difficult now, to get into an area where there's enough guaranteed incomes, salaries. You know, the rise of social media and the internet means a lot of people publish stuff for free and, therefore, if there's people who are prepared to write stuff for free then that's going to be attractive to people who want to generate lots and lots of content. And that also potentially compromises people, salaries as well, so it's a difficult space on that front. But, essentially, I look at it as a career, I think, yeah.

TB: Final couple of questions. How firm do you think the distinction is between sports journalism and sports PR? We've kind of mentioned it...

Int7: ... Yeah...

TB: ... Have you sensed that blurring increasing, the boundary shifting at all?

Int7: I think what's interesting is the way that sports organisations are taking ownership of content and understanding how they can control content more and essentially, you know, like a club's website is their own media platform and I think there's an increasing and worrying trend towards limiting access towards, let's say, independent journalists, umm, who aren't bound by the constraints of PR controls and whatever, and just delivering content immediately to consumers. You know, is there anything more bland or anodyne now than a match day programme given, I mean they are overwhelmingly so boring because they are content that's generated and written by club press officers. I'm not just talking about rugby but across sports. I mean, it's so rare that you open a programme now and there's anything interesting in them. And credit to the RFU on that front in that they still employ journalists from newspapers to write articles. I think they are by necessity slightly softer pieces than you might get otherwise but at least there is a degree of independence there, whereas most clubs just have internal employees writing the content.

It's just cheerleading rubbish, to be honest with you. That is just PR. It's just adverts for the club. And again, maybe there are people who want to read that stuff, but just pure fans who only ever want to be told good things about their club. But I think even, you know, proper fans understand that clubs do things wrong and nothing's perfect. So there's definitely a blurring of the lines. I think you need to be conscious of it all the time and, yeah, once you feel like you're slipping into the realms of being a PR then it's probably time you asked yourself some pretty good, hard questions about being a journalist as well. Yeah.

TB: And that takes us maybe into a focus for the final question here, which is what do you think these days – contemporary sports journalism – are the essential characteristics that sports journalists should have as they go about their craft?

Int7: Umm, I think you need to be personable, I think you need to get on with people, I think you need to be able to gain people's trust. Be honest, umm, be determined, hard-working, able to laugh at yourself, umm, yeah, not take things too seriously, but also understand that you can't be everyone's friend all of the time, because, as I say, you know, it is quite – there aren't many jobs where your work is presented to the public, either every day or every Sunday, whatever. I think it's only twigged with my dad quite recently that it's actually quite irritating to have him sort of call you going what he thought of that piece or that piece. My brother works in recruitment. He doesn't get a sort of school report from his dad at the end of each week about how he thinks his job's done. It's lovely in a way that I can have that interaction with my dad, who's a massive sports fan, but it's also a little but like, "Oh come on, can't we talk about something else?" I think it's very important to understand that, yeah, you can't... if you go into sports journalism and all you want to do is be mates with the players or, you know, get tickets to big events and go and watch sport for fun in the way that you or most of us grew up watching sport then it's not really the industry for you, because to write anything interesting or challenging – which is what we should all be striving to do – you're going to be writing stuff that's gonna rattle cages or, umm, upset people and that's, you know. If I was to say who's pissed off the most people in the last decade of sports journalism, you'd probably say David Walsh, Matt Lawton probably, umm, in recent times Lizzy with the cricket, you know. But they've also delivered some of the very best sports journalism. So, you're not in it to make friends, ultimately. You're in it to deliver good stories and interesting stories, I think. A thick skin. [Laughs.]

TB: Great.

#### **Eta – Initial distillation:**

- The participant says he did not hack phones while working at *The News of the World* but states that he felt some professional succour when it was revealed that colleagues had been, because it provided him with an explanation about why he had not been landing the magnitude of stories that fellow reporters had. "I started to realise that I wasn't landing a lot of the stories because I wasn't hacking phones. So that essentially brought me a bit of comfort, to be honest, even though it was awful what they were doing; from my own sense of worth and ability I realised I wasn't landing the stories they needed because I wasn't breaking the rules basically" (p1). He claims he would be "staggered" if phone-hacking had

not been used in connection with additional stories involving sports stars but admits he has “no evidence whatsoever” (p1).

- The notion of “going back to the same well time after time” is connected by the participant with the risk of bland content and (although not worded by him in this way) to self-censorship. “Working in sports journalism, you go back to the well, the same well, time after time after time, which is I think a major challenge of breaking big news stories as a sort of beat reporter... So you tread this constant tightrope between reporting what you know and what is interesting, and completely alienating yourself or alienating contacts or whatever” (p2). He sees his main duty as being that of reporting what he knows, although he acknowledges the fear of being “ostracised” can “compromise” this. “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, PRs, umm, that need to go back there and just not rock the boat. I mean the fear of sort of, umm, being ostracised in some way by writing stuff which is highly contentious and not necessarily, umm, sort of, if you’re going against the grain of what most people are writing... you’re there to pursue the truth, that’s why you should be there, and that should (be) kind of come what may, really. Erm, but clearly that’s, that’s not always as easy as it sounds and 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” (p3).
- When asked about the reasons for self-censorship, the participant indicates there can be a reluctance to criticise the sport one’s “grown up loving”, and that there can also be a wariness of alienating fellow sports journalists, who could “turn on you a bit” if articles are consistently negative. “You certainly don’t want to attack the sport that you’ve grown up loving so I guess there can be a temptation to sort of try and present a rosier image than it is... You know, if you’re constantly writing negative stories that are either hyper-critical of individuals or attacking organisations who run sport or whatever you’re gonna get a lot of pushback, whether it be from administrators, PR people, the individual themselves, or you get alienated, or your peer group, other journalists, start to turn on you a bit. You know, you can – it’s a very, very fine line. So I think it’s almost, for the sake of a better expression, it’s for the quiet life, really. Umm, writing highly controversial stuff all the time is quite challenging because you get a lot of challenges that go with it” (p4). Despite a vehement criticism of cheering in the press box (described as “cringe-worthy” (p3), the participant admits traces of fandom remain for a sports journalist and that these can feed into self-censorship: “There’s a sort of desire to protect the sport that you’re covering, a sort of blurred line between the fan and the journalist” (p4). Fear of legal action is also put forward as a reason later on in the interview: “That’s another reason why people steer clear of writing contentious stuff, because they’re worried about legal issues” (p9). This occurs again later still, although the participant adds that some good sports journalists revel in the sense of being in the middle of the action: “When you start getting phone calls from lawyers your life becomes a lot more complicated... people don’t want stress in their lives all the time and, umm, so you steer from stuff which is going to cause that potentially. But, yeah, I think the best journalists should have a sort of doggedness and a willingness to, yeah, accept that that is part of the job sometimes and, you know, don’t get me wrong, I think a lot of good journalists and reporters get a little bit of a buzz out of it potentially because they want to feel like they’re in the thick of things” (p12).
- The participant emphasises the importance of investigative work into topics which might not initially pique the interest of sports editors, and of the associated importance of “cage-rattling”. Describing the start of his investigative work into [REDACTED] he says: “[REDACTED]. Who wants to read about that, you know. We’re a sports desk, you know, what the hell’s that got to do with us? But it was... yeah, you know, but I was determined from quite an early stage, I felt there was a problem and it was, sort of, once I’d started

digging a bit beneath the surface and I started to believe there was a sort of – could I say a cover up? – but I definitely thought there was a wilful looking the other way from sports authorities. And I felt they were listening to people who were telling them what they wanted to hear rather than what they needed to hear... I did know it was going to rattle some cages, yeah. I felt a few cages needed rattling probably” (p5). Cage-rattling occurs later on in the interview too, with the participant emphasising the need to do this in order to fulfil one’s mission as a sports journalist: “To write anything interesting or challenging – which is what we should all be striving to do – you’re going to be writing stuff that’s gonna rattle cages or, umm, upset people and that’s, you know. If I was to say who’s pissed off the most people in the last decade of sports journalism, you’d probably say David Walsh, Matt Lawton probably, umm, in recent times Lizzy [Ammon] with the cricket, you know. But they’ve also delivered some of the very best sports journalism. So, you’re not in it to make friends, ultimately” (p18).

- While repeating what could be termed a Walshian sense of duty to report what he knows to be true, the participant also mentions his sense of obligation to players. Again reflecting on his work [REDACTED], he says: “I’ve felt a duty perhaps to the players involved, who I didn’t think were getting given enough of the counter-arguments” (p6). The importance of regarding things from the player’s perspective is made again later: “Essentially, I’ve tried to look at the game through a player’s eyes a little bit more” (p8).
- In the wake of the Leveson Inquiry, the participant believes sports journalists are more aware of codes, although indicates there could be a divergence between staff reporters and freelancers. “Post-Leveson it’s just more out there, you know, and I think certainly staff reporters are all briefed very clearly and expected and required to come in and listen to talks about codes of practice and what have you” (p9).
- The participant indicates that sports desks effectively surrendered editorial judgement in their desire to get as much content online as possible, and that online sports stories have been distorted by the desire to get Search Engine Optimisation-friendly player names in headlines. Quality has been detrimentally affected by the urgency of speedy publication. “Now there is an infinite amount of space on the web and therefore some newspaper websites, I think massively to their detriment, have gone down the path of: we will essentially put anything up if it’s content. And I remember, I remember having a conversation with quite a young chap, umm, when I was working at [REDACTED] who said during a big tournament, “Send us whatever you have, we’ll literally publish anything.” They just wanted content, content, content. And that’s because, especially in the earlier days – and I think this is changing, as we touched upon before we put the tape on – but I think there was this, “Hits, it has to be hits. Hits, hits, hits, hits,” no matter what they were hitting, the quality. I remember a guy at *The Independent* a long, long time ago, but he was told by his desk, “You have to get Danny Cipriani into the intro of this piece, regardless of whether he’s the main player, anything, just get his name into the intro because it gets hits online.” And that’s clearly distorting your impartiality, distorting your journalistic judgement” (p9-10).
- There is ambivalence at the interactivity fostered by social media, with the participant singling out football journalists as bearing the brunt of “vitriol”. “Things like social media have completely changed the relationship between journalists and readers, for the better and for the worse. There are some really good interactions on social media, there are some pretty ordinary ones as well. Umm, yeah, you can certainly get a fair bit of stick although I’m probably quite lucky not to work in football, where there’s a lot more vitriol I think directed at journalists and tribalism which makes it really hard to, umm – if you’re critical of a team then you’re being, people feel like they’re being personally attacked I think in football” (p10).



- The interviewee believes the emphasis placed on speed of publication narrows the number of sources that are consulted and therefore undermines the depth of the journalism, and can also prepare the conditions for the spread of misinformation. “I think that demand for speed all the time, it restricts a reporter’s ability to go to multiple sources... there’s much less of an opportunity for people to take their time to actually delve really deep into issues and go to multiple sources and speak off the record to people and kind of gather the big picture – paint the whole picture rather than little, small bits of it. And, umm, yeah, I think that time pressure is massively responsible for, in a negative way, towards, err... I guess the proliferation of fake news... essentially what I’m trying to say is that if you really want to get to the nub of a story and really understand a story you need to speak to more than just one talking head who says something about it. You need to speak to lots of people, you know, in order to do that you need time... I’m not sure too many journalists would tell you that the online world has improved their ability to deliver a good, thoroughly researched story” (p11).
- Participant says there have been “rumours” of sports journalists on occasion using their inside information about teams to make money through betting (p11).
- The participant is clear that he believes there are sports journalists who he believes are “cheerleaders”, and he sees it as a strongly undesirable epithet. “We all know reporters – other sports journalists – who always go for the soft line. You know, I think one of the things you least want to be referred to as a sports reporter is you’re a cheerleader – ‘They’re a cheerleader’” (p15).
- The participant is critical of what he terms a “quotes-based culture”, in which usually anodyne quotes are incorporated into stories just because a coach or prominent player has said them, not because they are necessarily newsworthy lines. Further, he believes that sports journalists generally acknowledge this as being a superficial form of sports journalism that is “anathema” to “real” journalism but do little to challenge it. “I think that’s a big problem, I really do, and the trouble is we all know it... You get little chunks where you maybe sit down with a player for 10 minutes and you’ve got a group of journalists sat around you who’ve all... It’s just quite a relentless treadmill of sort of just words being said. You know, there’s no real.. they’ll just be thrown away. It’s like pieces which just get forgotten tomorrow. ‘Bloke says something about something else’. You know, especially in those big tournaments, the players don’t want to say anything controversial and they’ve been briefed to within an inch of their lives about what they can and can’t say, you know so they always err on the side of caution. It’s very, very rare you get a really, really explosive or dynamite interview there. And because you’ve got 10 or 12 or 14 of you sat round, you’ve all got a different line you’re wanting to pursue and it just doesn’t... Yes, it feels quite claustrophobic and I think it’s anathema to kind of real, investigative journalism and really good quality journalism” (p15-16).
- What comes across is the level of emotion that can be involved in sports journalism. The participant spoke excitedly of the “buzz” he got when told to write a front-page exclusive for [REDACTED] (“He showed us these tapes with the editor and the sports editor at the time, and I was absolutely, my heart was pounding, it was sort of pretty – I knew this was a massive story. And then the sports editor said, ‘You’ve got two hours. I need a thousand words. Make it the best fucking piece you’ve ever written in your life.’ And I was just like, bloody hell. That was a buzz, you know” (p13)) and also spoke about breaking down after finishing another piece (“I remember a piece I wrote with [REDACTED] and I remember – this sounds pathetically dramatic – but I did, I think I wrote it and then burst into tears afterwards” (p17)).
- The participant mentions the increasing tendency of sports clubs and bodies to “take ownership” of content through their own platforms, and simultaneously restrict access to

independent journalists. This, he suggests, impoverishes the quality of content for fans. “What’s interesting is the way that sports organisations are taking ownership of content and understanding how they can control content more and essentially, you know, like a club’s website is their own media platform and I think there’s an increasing and worrying trend towards limiting access towards, let’s say, independent journalists, umm, who aren’t bound by the constraints of PR controls and whatever, and just delivering content immediately to consumers” (p17).

## Interviewee 8 - Theta

### Transcript:

TB: So the first question, it's a very open question to start off with, and it's emphasising your own personal experience. What do you think are the main ethical issues that confront sports journalists today, particularly ones that maybe arise through the fact we're now in a digital era?

Interviewee 8: Yeah, I mean, the job's changed beyond all recognition, I guess., umm, in terms of like social media now as well. And I think back to when I started in 2004, umm, and really then, Tom, I was writing purely for the newspaper. And I think now, kind of, with the digital era there's – I don't know if transparency is the right words – but I think there's a greater sense you're under scrutiny, I think more than you ever were before, through the digital era. You know, I think just in simplistic terms, back in the day if someone was a ██████████, for example, they might not have been drawn to your article and you wouldn't have had, you wouldn't have had that same level of feedback that you get now through the digital era. If I think through, you know, just ██████████ comments online – points that are made on there. And then feedback on articles through social media, which can be pretty brutal at times. And so, umm, there's that side of things, and then there's just in terms of the... I think what that does, I don't want to say it because always you should take 100 per cent pride in your job anyway and I'd like to think I've always done that, but I think there's that greater awareness now, whether it's subconscious or not, that whatever you're writing through the digital era, it's visible to far more people, and there's a chance for people to interact through that in a way that there probably wasn't previously. I think what comes with the digital era is the immediacy of reporting on things and then, umm, there are sometimes concerns over that – that are corners then cut to get stories done quicker, because everything's about... Everything should be about accuracy and speed, but sometimes does it become more about speed than accuracy? I don't find that with myself. I won't compromise the way I report on things. And I wouldn't. If I'm not 100 per cent comfortable in doing something then I'm not gonna follow that story. But there is greater pressure through the digital age, I think, because every newspaper wants to get something up first. And then I wonder whether all the checks that we were taught to go through over time – I'm thinking back to journalism school, university – do you have time always to tick all those boxes? And if you don't then tick those boxes does that mean that somethings don't get covered? Is a story sourced in the way it should be, or are you sort of thinking, "Yeah, I've got most of that, I've stood up perhaps not all of it but I don't want to be second or third to get the story up." And then becomes down, you know, to a sort of relationship between editors on the desk and the reporter, and being strong enough as a reporter to say, "You know, I'm not quite comfortable enough to go with this yet." Or the editor turning around and saying to you, "Are you sure you've got this properly sourced?" So, yeah, I don't know, it's a really open question, I'm sort of thinking on my feet here, but the digital age has transformed, you know, so many things. I think the work level – the amount of work you produce now – is far, far greater than ever before. Again, when I think back to 2004 when I started, sometimes you'd ring up and an editor would say, umm... I actually remember Mourinho leaving Chelsea the first time and being told – I can't remember what I was going off to do, maybe something at Villa, but it was like, "There's unlikely to be any space today

so don't, you know, don't break your neck kind of thing on anything." That just wouldn't happen now, you know? There's always space on the internet, it's as simple as that. So, if you're producing more and more, what I'm trying to say on this is: can you keep producing more and more and do it not just to the right standards in terms of how you write but in terms of how you gather news? Or does something have to, does it have to be a compromise?

TB: Can you think of any instances recently or from your own experience where maybe there has been that sense of the speed at which you're working has... I mean I know you said earlier that it hasn't compromised you, but where you felt under, kind of, pressure. Where you felt slightly compromised or the danger of compromise?

Int8: I'm trying to think now whether the stories that I've filed... I mean, I'll be honest, I am quite strong over stuff. Because I...

TB: ... Does that require an extra act of will now?

Int8: Yeah it does, and maybe I wouldn't have been able to be like that back in 2004, so it comes with time in the job. But I'm not going to be – bullied isn't the right word – I'm not going to be pressurised into delivering something before I'm comfortable with doing that. And I say that also because this job – I often have this conversation with my wife – I wouldn't say it's unique, but, you know, at the end of the day the only person who sees – it might be a bad example this – but the only person who sees a bricklayer's work is the person he's doing the job for. Everyone sees what I produce, you know, if they want to. It's going to go out there. [REDACTED] put it on Twitter and everyone can comment on what you've done during that day. And that's something that's come with the digital age, and I think that leads me personally to think, "I want to make sure that everything is absolutely right on that article." Perhaps a tiny bit more now. I said at the start, I always took 100 per cent pride in what I do, whether that's journalism or anything else. But, I want to be sure that everything's right because I know it's going to be scrutinised by, you know, anyone and everyone right down to getting your facts right. So I will be quite strong. They will come onto me. There is, one of the questions we often get asked these days is, and it's eased off a bit, but at one point it was OTT I felt and we were constantly getting asked, "When can you file by?" Now that wouldn't have happened years ago, but that question would regularly be asked by an editor, "When can you get this to staff?" And then sometimes it would be, "We need it by, you know, noon." Because launch times become really important for editors now. You know, in the past it would have been, "Let's get the copy with us by half five, six, that's fine because the newspaper has to go first edition at half eight." Now it's like optimum times for things to go online, and that means things need to come over, you know, sometimes I think quicker than I'm comfortable with. And what I'd say in that situation is, I'll say, "No, I haven't got time to do that in the way I wanted to." And no-one's ever come to me and said, "Well, you need to do it quicker." Now it might be different with a – I'm talking sort of interviews and features stuff there more – with a breaking news story. Say Claude Puel is sacked at Leicester in the next few days, and say someone else breaks. I'd know naturally, they'd be on at me straight away, I would see it myself on Twitter whatever and pick it up, I'd need to get across that story. But I've certainly had situations where I've said... and let's say someone's broken a story and I've looked at the source of that story. I've

looked at the journalist who's done it and thought, "Yeah, they get stuff right." But I still would say I need to know myself that story's right and if they're saying "C'mon, *The Telegraph* have got this that Claude Puel's gone," I'd feel that pressure – that we need to get something up quickly – but I'd still be thinking, I want to make sure I take the time so I can stand this up. And I wouldn't have any qualms, in the way that a younger reporter would, in saying, "I'm sorry, I can't stand this up at the minute, I'm waiting for someone to come back to me." But I do think, I do think there are other examples now where newspapers will run stuff online without sourcing it properly, maybe because another newspaper's got it and they feel they have to have something on their site. But I'll try and think of personal situations during the interview where, umm, I might have felt that pressure to deliver.

TB: Ok, I'm sure things will bubble up as we go through. Do you think a sports journalist has duties, and if they do to whom are those duties owed?

Int8: What, more generally in terms of anything or holding people to account and things like that, do you mean?

TB: Well, what motivates you? I mean, maybe it's not a sense of duty to, I don't know, it might be a duty to the truth, the duty to readers, maybe a sense of responsibility to your editor. I don't know.

Int8: Yeah, there are lots of things there, I guess. You know, I think you have a, yeah, a duty to inform readers. Certainly to be fair and honest with your reporting. Accuracy, obviously. Umm, I think we do have a responsibility as well to, umm, hold people to account. You know, if I'm looking at my job specifically as football obviously whether football clubs are being run in the right way; umm, to not go along there and just, you know, blindly follow what was served up; question things that are presented to us, because obviously in this day and age now clubs are very, far more active now in putting their own stories out there, and reading between the lines on those. But, yeah, again, I think that comes with the digital age now that you, it sort of, you do feel that greater sense of responsibility as well because you know that a wider number of people are reading your articles. They don't have to be [redacted] to read what you're writing, and I think that's, you know, I think that's a big shift. You put something on Twitter, you're very conscious of the reaction. I've mentioned that a lot already, and I do feel for me that's a really big shift that we are, I do feel that's quite a game-changer. Comments under [redacted] are one thing, and they can be quite brutal, but I think the scrutiny you come under through social media generally is one of the biggest changes I've sort of seen in the job. But, yeah, umm.

TB: So there's a greater sense of accountability to the readers now?

Int8: Yeah, definitely. Definitely, because the readers are far broader than they ever were before and they can interact directly with you, and they will. You know, if you've done something on there that they don't agree with, or you might have made an error, you might have got something wrong, you know, a statistic, or something else, then they will feedback to you on that. But, yeah, I think I take my responsibilities seriously obviously to [redacted] as well, you know. I know what [redacted], what they expect from

me and the way you go about your work: diligently, thoroughly, you know. I think also trying to write – if you get a bit deeper into sort of the job itself, the nitty-gritty – trying to write in a way that is giving people more than they just get through, you know, the club website or, or – you don't just want to be skimming the surface, you want to be getting a bit deeper really in terms of the content that you cover.

TB: You kind of touched on this with that answer, but what do you think then are the most important ethical qualities a sports journalist should have or seek to cultivate in their practice?

Int8: Umm, you've obviously got to be honest and truthful in the way you go about your work. Honest and truthful to yourself, not just to your readers and the people you work for. And a lot of what you're trying to do is build relationships with people, umm, that's where your stories come from. Err, and you've also got to put yourself in a position where you're not going to be compromised. Umm, and it can be hard at times when you, if you get to know someone who becomes a good contact and then things unravel. But you've got to report fairly and impartially, you know, that's the key thing. You'd never want anyone to sort of look at your writing and feel there's a level of bias there or you're not scrutinising people in the way that you should. Umm, and there's all the sort of legal parameters that come with things as well, you know. That you're just going about your job in the correct way, really.

TB: So the values that you mention there – scrutinising, holding people to account, the impartiality – where do those values come from? Are they inherited ones as it were from journalism school and learnt on the job, or something from within yourself?

Int8: Yeah, it's a good question. I think it's a combination of the two really. Certainly journalism school would have been the first time that I'd come across them. And then when I joined [REDACTED]. I joined as a trainee and then those sort of things become ingrained in you quite quickly. And I think they come from you as a person as well. I think they come from your upbringing. They don't just apply to journalism, you know, the way you do anything. And when I hand over a piece of work, like, I have had this before, where sometimes people say to me that it doesn't have to be 100 per cent. Ninety per cent is enough. And it's not for me. Now that doesn't mean, Tom, that what I do is 100 per cent in everyone's eyes, because some people might read a piece of my work and think, "That's not very good, he didn't spend very long on that." But whenever I press that button, and this I think is a personal challenge, a real personal challenge, I've had with the digital age, I have to be absolutely happy that what I've sent over is the best I could do. Umm, and that was the same in previous employment prior to journalism. Whatever I did, that's just me as a person. It doesn't mean, to reiterate, that it's the best in everybody's eyes, but for me it has to be. And that's quite challenging with the digital age because of what I said at the start: the pressures that you come under to file faster – faster, and faster, and faster. And I found myself fighting against that, thinking... My boss, [REDACTED], has said to me many times, "[REDACTED], it does not have to be one hundred per cent. Sometimes it can be, you know, ninety per cent, it can be seventy per cent." And I'm thinking, "No." Because the reader's not going to look at that and be thinking, "Oh, you were told you could only do it seventy per cent." Do you know what I mean? It's not just the reader, it's more me myself. I want to know that what I've done is, you know, the best I could do. And if that means it

takes me a lot longer and I have to work through the night to write an interview, that's fine. The challenges I guess I come under then are when something breaks and you have to do it there and then, and then that becomes more difficult, because if it's a breaking news story about a manager you want to source the story properly. I want to speak to someone at the club's who's going to say to me, "Yes, that has happened."

TB: So just listening to the last few answers it sounds like you obviously have very high standards for yourself and actually you feel, because you're experienced in the job now, you are able to hold those values true to yourself, despite maybe pressures from the editor, from the desk, from the need for speed, as it were.

Int8: I think that's the interesting thing. One, it comes from experience, and, two, it comes from knowing the people on the desk very well. So, [REDACTED] [REDACTED] editor, I've known for a long time – [REDACTED] since when I joined, who wasn't in that role then and was a reporter. I have a good relationship with them and class them as, as kind of, umm, well I class them as friends, also, although that obviously doesn't, you don't think of them in those terms when you're working. Could I go to another newspaper now and be as confident in standing up to them in this way? Possibly not. Maybe another newspaper would have, you know, you speak to colleagues *etcetera* who come under I think sometimes, umm – not more pressure, because that makes it sound like there isn't pressure at [REDACTED] when there is – but sometimes I think they get more unrealistic things given to them to do. Whereas I might say "No, I wouldn't do that," at [REDACTED] [REDACTED], or "I don't think that's right," I don't think they always feel able to do that, which is partly maybe down to their experience in the job but also in fairness to them maybe because they've got bosses – editors – who are less forgiving, less understanding in those circumstances. Umm, so, yeah, I think that's definitely those two strands really: one, experience, and, two, cultivating a good relationship with the people I work with, feeling like I can say those things. Don't get me wrong, Tom, I don't think I can say, you know, "Oh, give me another two hours to do that, chuck that story out," but it does mean that I'm going to say, you know, when I call back and ten minutes later I still haven't managed to source the story yet, I'm working on it, I'm waiting for calls back, and I feel comfortable saying that. Umm, I do think others might feel, "Do you know what? I believe what [REDACTED] or [REDACTED] [REDACTED] have done there, or *The Sun*, I know that reporter, he always gets stuff right, I'm going to go with it too." I think they would do that. I think they'd do that to save themselves a bollocking.

TB: So, just to change the focus slightly, I mean, how large a role or does it figure at all the Editors' Code of Practice in your work as a sports journalist? Is that anything that, kind of, gets considered?

Int8: No, no, it doesn't. No. No, you mean like more generally the...

TB: Well, do you ever have to have recourse to it or, you know, I'm just wondering really in terms of your practice as a sports journalist whether regulation, codes of conduct, are anything that loom large?

Int8: No. You know what, Tom, I only look at it when it comes up more generally, say it's referenced somewhere to do with news stories. And, umm, then I'm reading about, you know... It's a totally different strand that isn't directly applicable to my job. Of course I'm aware of it, but I can't sit here and say to you now, "I consult it often, I look at it often," because it doesn't really impact on me, I feel. I can't even say on a regular basis, it hardly ever does. Yes, I'm aware of it, but 99 per cent of my work isn't gonna stray into those areas. I've had other times where... I was working on a story a few years ago about, umm, about referees and an issue in the Premier League with referees and officials being really unhappy with their, err, the way it was being run. And I gathered a lot of information and quite a few stories – about 3,000 words in total – it was a project I was working on for a long time, but I couldn't get anyone to go on the record. But they'd all talk to me off the record and give me good stuff. And it was a project I was consulting with [REDACTED], I didn't go off and do this on my own – they knew I was doing this. Basically, a whistleblower kind of came to me initially, emailed me out of the blue, and I met with them, took it all up, got all this together, a couple of news stories and a background piece on it all, and then I sat down with the editor of [REDACTED] and the deputy editor of the paper, who I wouldn't normally deal with, and my sports news editor, and they just said they couldn't run it because we didn't have anyone going on the record, and we felt it to be too risky, kind of, without that. Umm, so that would be one of the few occasions where I sort of strayed into that other territory because obviously sports journalism doesn't readily bring you into that – with someone like David Conn it might more often, who's writing financial stories and stories questioning the way clubs are being run *etcetera*. He does a brilliant job. It's investigative reporting – that's what I'm looking for – he's doing a different line of work. But, umm, now I don't know, but I wonder whether that story with a different paper about the referees whether the sort of checks that are in place at [REDACTED], might have been a bit more relaxed elsewhere, and they might have been prepared to – not take a punt with it – but go with it. But [REDACTED], you know, they weren't on that occasion and I respected that. There's a lot of work that had kind of gone to waste, but I think that's where at [REDACTED] when, you know, when you talk about the ethics and the way we do things, every box has to be ticked and if it's not the story won't happen.

TB: So, is it fair to say that you feel that [REDACTED] internal standards, as it were, are sufficiently rigorous that for you, as a sports journalist, the Editors' Code – the wider industry code – is therefore not so important.

Int8: Exactly, exactly. Because I know if I presented stuff when I've been working on, you know, stories before – like that referees one and since – that when I present it to [REDACTED] or [REDACTED] who I initially deal with, who I deal with on a daily basis, umm, their scrutiny would be as much if not more than that code of conduct, code of practice if you like, to be honest with you. We don't write fliers, we can't write fliers. And they're going to ask me every time: who's your source? Where have you got this from? Are you sure about it? You know, they're not gonna, you know, they're let me go and write it in a way that leaves us all open to various sort of actions subsequently. So that is exactly why that wouldn't come into my head, because I know how [REDACTED] operate from a news point of view. And all those questions would be asked by them at the outset. Yes, there are still cases where something has to go to, obviously, to the lawyer, umm, and they might come back and make, you know, minor changes with regards to the wording of an article, just to sort of cover yourself



slightly. But no, that's exactly the reason why I wouldn't feel the need to consult it because - I'm in danger of making [redacted] sound like the greatest thing in the world – but I'm just trying to say that there are checks in place at the outset that mean I do not have to be referencing that.

TB: Ok. We touched on the premium placed on speed sometimes but I wonder more generally, how do you think the pressure for high audience figures online, umm, how do you think that's affected the content?

Int8: Yeah, that's really annoyed me. That really frustrates me, probably as much as anything I'd say. In my eyes now, umm – and I'm not identified on this at all, am I?

TB: No.

Int8: Editorial judgment now – and this is certainly the case at my newspaper as well, at [redacted] – I think there's too much emphasis on, I think it's guided far too much by internet hits. And that really is a source of frustration for me. Not just internet hits, but sometimes people just clicking. We seem to have an obsession as well with the length of time that people spend on an article now, which are two different things obviously. Someone clicking, and how long they are actually going on that page. And that, for me, I really enjoy long-form journalism, I think that's restricted me. Really, really frustrated me. So word counts have come down quite significantly. And now to do a long-form piece of journalism it's far harder than it ever was before, because the feeling being... Look, they've got data to back it up and they'll put it to me. I've had arguments with this with senior people [redacted]. A few of us have, where we really were quite upset about it because previously, Tom, I'd have been able to write an interview; it if was 1,200 words – if there was a 1,200-word slot in the paper it could run to pretty much what you wanted online, say 1,700, 1,800, 2,000 words. Now I'm not going to write that thinking it's a load of rubbish. You know, I'll leave all those words in because I can't be bothered to edit it. Sometimes you come away from an hour, two hours in someone's company like this and you think, "Do you know what, I've got a bloody good interview here. I want to let this run. I want to use the really good material and not have to, you know, cut through everything." So we used to be able to do... In the paper stuff would get a really good show as well, but you'd file something and say, "And run in full on the web." And then I'd ring up and go through suggested cuts. I wouldn't expect someone in the office to sort of spend an hour trying to work out how I can get this 600 words gone. But about a year or so ago that stopped and, umm, and it disappointed a number of us, and it was put to us – and they gave me an example of one of my pieces, that I complained about. I had an exclusive interview with Swansea's owners, who hadn't really said anything, and I think I had 1,050 words for it. And I said that's just not enough to be able to do justice to an hour with these two guys. And they wouldn't budge on it, and then I went in and spoke, and they basically showed me the number of people who'd read it and how it sort of tails off after a certain point i.e. 600 or 700 words. And so they said if you'd have filed more people, generally, wouldn't have read more. And then that frustrated – yeah, I get that, that's black and white, I can't argue with that argument in isolation, but it disappoints me because I kind of think, well, that basically means we're saying that the people who are judging how much we write now are the people who are purely the readers. I'm not saying they shouldn't have a say, obviously, but I think it's a two-way relationship.

Sometimes something might not generate a massive number of hits but it might be a really well-received article and that should still have a place in my eyes. So I think, umm, I think the word count side of things – we're not as bad, we don't do what the, the stuff the *Daily Mail* do, I just think some of it is online utter garbage. I mean they did a story the other day showing – a couple of weeks back, two or three weeks back, I nearly tweeted about it but thought I can't be bothered in the end – it showed Man City players turning up at a train station. "City players wearing woolly hats" kind of thing, it was a freezing cold day. And I'm thinking, what is that? You know, it's not journalism, it's just utter nonsense. We would not do stuff like that, in fact we have something at [REDACTED] now called "content reduction," has anyone mentioned this to you?

TB: Is it the same thing, I know there was a time at [REDACTED] – I don't know if it's still in place now – where you'd be given basically certain word lengths for certain stories, like 400, 900.

Int8: Yeah, yeah, set word lengths, but now we have – so content reduction came in where... when the internet first came into being really at [REDACTED] we started pushing it. We would put everything online. Anything and everything would go on there. And then, over time, there came this realisation that, actually, less is more in a way. So we file fewer stories now. When I ring up, there'd be some stories where I'd ring up and say, "I've got this," and seven or eight years ago they'd have said, "Yeah, just file it – 300 or 400 words." And now they'll check, because they only want to do a certain number of stories each day. So, umm, and that hasn't necessarily been a bad thing. I think content reduction is very different to restricting word counts, umm, because I think you need some quality control, otherwise you end up doing what the *Mail* does. So when I go to a press conference someone will be expected from the *Mail* to file something from the broadcast section, something from the written section, no matter whether what is in the broadcast section is rubbish. They'll be expected to find a line in it. And they'll do something else from the written section which is embargoed and which will go in the paper the next day, and will go online also. I don't agree with that approach at all. I think there needs to be quality control. You need to be looking at it and thinking, is this worth going online? So content reduction, which is really not word counts but fewer stories, and then you give greater prominence to good stories online, which get read better because it's not like the *Mail* stuff everywhere – the *Mail* isn't alone, I'm just sort of mentioning them. But the word count side of it is frustrating. Content reduction I get, I've bought into, and I understand, and I see the value in it. The reduction in word counts, which is linked with how long people are spending reading, because I think now they probably think a lot of people just pick up a phone and just want to quickly read a short, you know, few pars – 400 words, then they're done on it. It's almost like we're saying people can't engage any more than that with something, so they want to move on. That, that is a product of the digital age and it is a great source of frustration for someone like myself who likes writing longer articles. Say I'm working on something now... I'm trying to do something with [REDACTED]. And something like that they would definitely give me space to do. But say I sat down with Andy King, for example, later this week and had, umm, I know he's not a huge name, but say I thought, hey, this is really great. If they said there's 900 words then it would be 900 words now. They wouldn't let you run more and more and more, because I think they saw that we were also – in terms of the overall word count – we were writing far more than our kind of

competitors, the other broadsheets, so they felt we need to bring it down. Another reason I'd say for bringing it down is to limit the amount of time – it's obviously linked to people in the office working: subs. Do you know what I mean? It may well be headcount-related, you know. Because one argument they put to me was, well, we haven't got time for a sub to go through. You said an 1,800-word, well, there's only 1,200 words to sub it down for the paper. And I'd say, "Well, I do that," because it hadn't come from sport, this directive, it had come from above at [REDACTED]. Well, I'd never expect a sub to do that. I've got the cuts highlighted on my screen, I'll ring up and say, "Take that par out, take that par out, that par for the paper," and it's done. But then they still said, I think they felt probably not everyone would do that. So, there are lots of factors that come into it really, Tom. It's partly through looking at the screen and seeing how many people are reading, but I think it's probably influenced also by newsrooms, you know, working towards what is obviously a difficult financial situation – thinking of headcounts and all the rest, and how many subs they need to employ, how much work have those subs got to do. Sorry, that's a long answer, but it's a bugbear for me, that.

TB: Earlier on you mentioned about how the interactivity of social media and the free and frank views of some readers, you know, can be quite brutal.

Int8: Yeah.

TB: And I just wonder if you could expand a bit on that and talk maybe a little bit more generally too about how social media has affected the decisions you make, kind of ethically or editorially.

Int8: Yeah, I think there are two things there. First, the comments section on [REDACTED], which has obviously been there a long time, is brutal and, you know, there's a saying within [REDACTED], and it probably applies in a lot of newsrooms, certainly for ages at [REDACTED]: never look below the line. Which is sad in a way because it's, kind of, saying don't ever go and read the comments under your article on your own website. I've got friends and family who do, and often I'll ask, why do you look at it? And don't get me wrong, they won't say bad things to me but I just don't want to go there. I know some really stupid things get posted on there, and often it turns into an issue that has nothing to do with the article and just ends up with rival fans arguing and all the rest and descends into chaos. So, I mention that in relation to social media because I feel social media is very, very different. Social media is a far more personal experience in that, yes, I could log on at [REDACTED] and I'd have to log on if I want to make a comment, and I do sometimes. Very, very rarely I'll go below the line and make a comment if someone's maybe asking me something, and the feeling is if you do go on and log in – because they've always encouraged us to – the standard of debate raises a bit. "Oh, the author's on here now." You know, you don't get so much nonsense. Very rarely will I do that. But with Twitter, I've obviously got a personal account that every time I go on there it's going to say "notifications" and, umm, so it feels like a very different experience to viewing the comments at [REDACTED], which you can kind of just shut away from and think, ok, I've read through to the bottom, nothing's been put in the article – changes made that I'm unhappy with – fine. Although sometimes I do think, especially if it's an emotive issue, umm, the person who I've done the interview with and their family, they may well be looking below the line. That crosses my mind a lot. I

think, how happy are they with how much our moderators are taking out here or leaving in, more to the point? But, yeah, Twitter is different because Twitter is personal. You're logging on, you're looking at your notifications, something that's coming straight back to you on that feedback. Umm, and, dare I say it, I'm probably as guilty as anyone, of looking at the one or two bad comments instead of the 97, 98 good ones. You know, I dwell on those more and you can waste a lot of emotional energy on that. Too much, too much.

TB: Do you have any defence strategies for that, other than disengagement? Is there now...

Int8: ... I've only ever blocked one person.

TB: Right.

Int8: Only ever one. And he posted personal abuse about another, umm, he was constantly coming back, criticising stuff that I was writing about his football club, which was swimming against the tide in terms of all the other feedback I was getting. And then he posted some personal abuse about another supporter of that club and I just drew the line there and I thought, do you know what I'm not having that on my timeline. But some people don't, I think some people don't, umm, I look at the abuse some people get and I think, "What do you do there?" but I think they just take a blanket view: just won't respond. Some people block a lot. I don't like blocking because it kind of feel like the other person's won in a weird way, you know, if that makes sense. It's kind of telling them you're overly concerned at what they're doing. But when it strayed into criticising someone else I felt I had to. But, umm, I always look at the notifications, for sure. I scroll through them, try and interact where I can. I had some emails recently actually, giving me feedback and stuff, which doesn't happen often about an article I did on the state of the Premier League, basically stating that there's a massive disparity between top and bottom. And I had three emails from Huddersfield fans, who were really unhappy with what I wrote. Umm, and I replied to all of them. And, I replied to them, and in a way I was quite annoyed with them because they made a lot of assumptions about me. Umm, and I always try and reply, Tom. I don't, even if they've, because I kind of think if someone's taken the trouble to write to me, even if I don't agree with what they say, I should write back. In a way I think others think "You're mad, [redacted], just let it slide." And actually then, after a few emails, the conversation – if I can put it like that – kind of improved. Umm, but more generally on Twitter, err, I'm very conscious, I'm interested as soon as an article goes up what are people thinking about that? What are their views on it? That doesn't affect how I write...

TB: ... I was going to ask you that question, does it ever inhibit what you write? Is there a little voice in your head saying, "I wonder how this is going to go down with the trolls or with people on social media"?

Int8: Yeah. No, it doesn't inhibit me, but there's definitely a voice in my head thinking that. I think it makes you, even though, kind of, and I'm far from perfect but as my wife would say, when you say you're a bit of a perfectionist it doesn't mean you get everything right, it's just in your own little mind you're trying to do everything as best as you can. And I am like that, umm, and I always want to be far better than what I am and what I do, but I am trying to sort of constantly think. So, I don't think it's had a massive difference to me but it certainly

makes me aware when I'm writing a piece, I'm thinking, especially if you're straying into territory where you're writing about a club you might not often do something on, you're thinking, I'm not going to do some... There's nothing more annoying if you're a fan of a football club and you watch some analysis and it's really general, like, "I think they've got enough to stay up this year." What does that mean? It's throwaway lines. So I'm always conscious, thinking, "This is going to be scrutinised to the nth degree and I want to make sure that I've covered every base." And I think social media's been good for that, I think generally for journalism. I'd like to think it's raised the standard. What you can't do nothing about is obviously the, umm, it's raised the standard in some ways and in other ways it's obviously, because of the pressure, the immediacy of trying to break stories, it's made people – some journalists, I think – cut corners and put things up before they should have done. Not always because it's the journalist's fault, it's the editors'. But I don't think it inhibits, I genuinely don't think it ever, umm, inhibits me. I think if anything it makes me go that extra mile and research that little bit more than I already would have done, and just think "I've got to make sure I get everything right". Because there's nothing worse than putting something up and someone comes back to you after a few minutes saying, you know, even if they say, "Nice piece, just to let you know you've got something wrong there." And then you'll get some people saying, "Lazy journalism," and you think, ahh, I spent bloody ages on that article. It's anything but lazy but I've just made a mistake and that's very different.

TB: Clickbait then. I mean, you mentioned there about some people cutting corners and you mentioned bobble hats at train stations and stuff. Is that something that's mentioned in the same breath as social media – obviously click bait. How do you view that as a sports journalist?

Int8: I just think utter garbage. Absolute garbage.

TB: And is there a lot of garbage swilling around?

Int8: There's too much, there's too much. They're just not stories, but then it's not just sports journalism is it? You know, you look down the – I'm slagging off *The Daily Mail* here all the time – but you look down that, what do they call it? The.. something of shame?

TB: The sidebar of shame.

Int8: The sidebar of shame. You know, and there's so much on there. And I remember speaking to Peter Crouch years ago – and I think I even cleared it in my piece with him – where, you know, the story is him going out for a coffee with Abbey Clancy in north London. And you think, well how is that a story? But then they'd argue, they're obviously doing it looking at their number thinking, this gets clicks. And that comes back to your earlier point about, you know, from an editorial point of view where's the judgement here? Is the judgement coming from journalistic experience and news values and story values, or is it coming from our readers? And it is always a two-way thing where you're, you've got to have an awareness of your readership, haven't you? That's so important. You know, what do our readers want? We want to give them that. But has it gone so far the other way now that we're letting... And are they really, I mean, I guess readers don't identify – clearly they don't

identify with one newspaper in the way say my dad would have done years ago; a different generation would have bought one paper and they'd have only seen what was in that newspaper. Nowadays, I think most people will be on social media and if there's something from a football point of view that's interesting about their club they'll go and read it, with the exception probably of Liverpool and *The Sun*, you know, for obvious reasons. They'll go and read it whatever paper it is. And that's good really for our industry because it's sort of increased the readership of, you know, everyone. Umm, but err, in terms of a lot of those stories, you know, *The Mail* do so many of them and I remember that the other day at a train station I thought, go on, what is the line in this? What is the – where you ring up and your editor says, "What's the line?" Well, there isn't one. And I guess it only works as well through photos, doesn't it? You know, you couldn't write "Man City players turned up wearing woolly hats," but there's a feeling that, oh well, people will want to see, you know, Aguerro and Sane and Silva, de Bruyne, stood on a train platform. You know, so in my eyes it isn't journalism, Tom. And I think it's a real, I think it's... Anyone can do that. Anyone can write that from an office. You're not ringing anyone, you've not got contacts. It's not a story. Someone's editor's just said, "Here's some photos we've got in, can you write to those pictures?" Then someone's going to turn around to me and say, "Well, [REDACTED], you're wrong that is journalism today. You've got to move with the times." But if I was asked to do that I wouldn't do it. I'd find another job, Tom. I would. If I was sat in an office and being asked to do that – that isn't why I got into journalism to do stuff like that. Maybe people would say, "Well those guys don't want to be doing that, but it's a platform to get where they want to be," which I kind of understand. But it isn't something I'd be comfortable doing.

TB: Also with the social media age there are issues around verification...

Int8:... Yeah...

TB: ... and maybe fake news...

Int8: ... Yeah...

TB: ... and being wary, perhaps more wary, of certain claims and sources...

Int8: ... Yeah...

TB: ... How is that an issue for you, just in terms of ensuring that you are sourcing stories properly? Has the social media age complicated that picture?

Int8: I think it's complicated it because sometimes stories gather legs when they shouldn't have any. Do you know what I mean? And things can be started by people in the know and that kind of thing and a story gets that momentum behind it that, you know, it never really should have. Or sometimes it's by journalists who you think probably should be getting it right but they don't because they've had to take a bit of a punt on it, which might not be just down to them, it might be through pressure of needing to break a story or something like that. Umm, but, no, I don't, I can't think of anything anecdotally where I've seen something come up – because I'm still always thinking, you know, if a story's broken about one of the clubs I cover I'll be looking at who's the journalist, who's done it? Do they



normally get stuff right? And, you know, from a personal point of view if I'm trying to find out say what's happening at Leicester at the moment then, you know, I'd be taking my judgement from the sources I've got who I trust. Umm, but it does give a platform to some dubious journalists, if we can put it like that.

TB: I think I know the answer to this question already, but have you ever, as far as you're aware, breached the law or a code of practice in the course of your work? Or if not you, are you aware of anybody – a sports journalist – having done so?

Int8: No, not at all. You know, I've just – I was thinking of something else as you were just saying that. One story I really regret years ago, it was on ██████████, and I think ██████████ was manager at the time. And this is an example of where you learn as you go about sourcing stories. My, umm, editor at the time came back, many years ago, came back and walked in the office and said, "I've had a really strong steer that the ██████████ manager's going to get the sack." And I felt, I was not long in the job – I reckon I'd been in the job less than a year – and I felt like a pressure there to, whether it was direct from him or just in my mind that thing where you think "I can't let my editor down here, he's got the story, he's got so far, I've got to deliver it." And I'd sourced it partly but in no way now enough that I'd be comfortable with my experience. I ended up running that story and ██████████ put a statement out – a scathing statement out about it. Umm, and I don't think he did end up... I don't think, we were writing like he was close to being sacked, we weren't writing like he was going to go. But anyway, it was a really important lesson for me about sourcing stories and never allowing that pressure from above, you know; thinking the only person I've got to satisfy really – or the most important person I've got to satisfy – is myself here, that I'm happy with what I'm writing. And I wonder if, in this digital age, two things: a) experience tells me I wouldn't have done that, but in the digital age I think it would have made me think even more about putting that story online, in a way that it perhaps didn't back then when it was only going to go in the newspaper. "Only" sounds bad, but it wasn't going to be subjected to the same level of scrutiny that we've got now, and that's why I say, Tom, that there's good and there's bad things with social media, do y'know what I mean? Because, for me, yeah I was inexperienced then and a bit naïve back then, I'd literally only just – I know it would have been in the first year I was there, because of who the editor was. But no, to come back your question about breaking the law and stuff like that, no. I worked with ██████████ who were caught up in that phone hacking.

TB: Right. What, on the sports side of the operation?

Int8: Yeah, yeah.

TB: Right. And was that in the course of them fulfilling, were they – not seconded – but were they working on a kind of more newsy side of sport as it were.

Int8: No, not necessarily. No. They were sort of doing what I was really in terms of just having a few clubs that you cover. Umm...

TB: But they'd been caught, they'd been phone-hacking?

Int8: They were named many years later; one of them being named. Check it but Raoul was one of them [REDACTED]. Lovely guy as well. Terrific bloke. Err, he was certainly named. Err, and I don't know what became of him. Umm. But he would have been named long after I'd left [REDACTED]. But in terms of anyone else, no. I can't think of anything that would qualify for what you said.

TB: I touched on this I suppose by asking you whether you were ever inhibited by the thought of what people might say or respond to on social media, but to what extent do you think sports journalists, or yourself in particular, what extent do you think you self-censor: hold back on stuff.

Int8: Sorry something's just come into my head while you were saying that, is it alright if I mention something? Is that alright?

TB: Yeah, of course, yeah.

Int8: Another thing that we do now – you know when you sort of asked me about anecdote stuff, I'm thinking of things now and other pieces that I regret are coming into my head now. I think one thing that we try and do now as well, more than ever, is read too much into very little – with football, with sport, certainly with football. So if there's a little – it's probably become harder and harder to break stories these days. Umm, the sheer number of people working in journalism, I'm talking rolling news channels as well, that kind of thing that you're competing against that you weren't years ago. So maybe sometimes just little trends become almost as interesting as stories, trying to spot something before it's actually kind of really happened, and we do a lot of stuff where I think... This season I've – here's one – this season I was asked to do something on Bournemouth and how well, you know, how well they've done, how well they've started the season, why's it all clicked. And I was uncomfortable doing it because I thought it was only a few games into the season – eight or nine games, something like that. And I said that to the office. "No, no, no, I'm not – they've got some tougher games to come." I said it's too early to start saying stuff like that and it's been proved right as well. That's not me being a smart arse, I just think there's far too much of that these days. So years ago, [REDACTED] correspondent went around – I can remember I was living in [REDACTED] at the time – getting off the train, loads of stuff, and he said we need a piece on [REDACTED], sort of writing about why he's made a really good start to life [REDACTED]. I'm not even like a [REDACTED], obviously I don't cover the club and, again, now with experience I'd have said "no" to that, without a doubt. I wrote that article and obviously we were made to look like a prize clown really, months later when he's gone. So I think far too much of that goes on in journalism where we kind of look for a few little things and try and read – I say journalism, in football journalism – and read a lot into it. Umm, and I think social media now, if you put that kind of article up on [REDACTED] now, umm, I think in your mind – I was uncomfortable writing it at the time, I think now with social media I'd have been – not just experience – I think again I'd have been even more like, "Absolutely not am I going to town on [REDACTED] being great after only a month or two." You've left yourself open to all sorts of criticism, and you also know that [REDACTED] is one of those clubs where the fan base is so, umm, opinionated, there'd just be some clubs you know they're just going to be on you when you write a piece. So, sorry, yeah that just came into my head as something that I just think again has become



far too prevalent in football, people trying to... I don't know if it's Leicester winning the league as well in more recent times, and people trying to think we want to see the next one coming if something like this is going to happen. Hence the Bournemouth question. But I think as a journalist you have to be strong enough to sort of say, "I'm not sure I really agree with this." But also that kind of piece can be a classic for, "This will get loads of hits." Do you know what I mean? "Are Bournemouth the next..." I wasn't told it was going to be that headline; I don't think it would have been for a moment in [REDACTED]. "Are Bournemouth going to be the next Leicester?" You know, it's that kind of thing where you're asking a bit of a question and you're thinking, I'm not really sure there's substance there. Sorry, ask me your question again, Tom.

TB: It was about the extent, or otherwise, that you maybe self-censor. So, withhold facts that you're aware of, or with an opinion piece withhold a certain opinion because you maybe anticipate that it might provoke vitriol or whatever. Do you think there's that? I'm just interested really in the flow of information from sports journalists out to the wider public.

Int8: Yeah. I think if you can, I think if you can back up what you're saying. Certainly another things that helps greatly in this day and age is statistics. You know, you can go to Opta – I will email them like I did for that Huddersfield article that I knew would go down badly with some of the fans, because I was partly [REDACTED]. Fans of those clubs aren't really happy with that, you know that. So you know you've got to back that up with statistics. Stats on their own aren't going to prove your argument but they're going to support. And you can obviously, you know, get that kind of information. There's no excuse now, you haven't got to trawl through Rothmans like people did when I first joined [REDACTED]. We'd have them all in the office and you'd look back through. You can just go to Opta and within five minutes, you know, they'll send you back full data on stuff. So, I don't think I, I don't think I worry so much with stuff like that, because I kind of feel, ok, there's an element of opinion in it – people might not be happy – but I'm supporting it with, you know, something – without making it sound too great – scientific. You know, evidence to say this is why I'm arguing what I am. No, I don't, umm, I don't know that I worry too much about... It does come into your head. An element of self-censorship comes into your head for sure, but I don't think it, umm, I don't think it greatly – because of the awareness of what people are gonna come back with. But it only comes into your head, you think I've got to make sure I get this absolutely right; that what I'm saying is spot on. *[Interview paused by interviewee for toilet break.]* You could be covering Liverpool Friday night, Man United on Saturday – who I wouldn't normally cover – and with the digital age, again, you can go and find whatever you need just like that. There's no excuse for not having done the level of research. So you shouldn't be taking a punt on things and worrying what people think about your work because if you've researched stuff properly – and there's no excuse for not having done that, and I will spend a long time researching – everything should kind of be there in your mind that you're not leaving yourself open to... obviously if you say something outlandish, write something outlandish, that's different. But I guess they act in a way that balances extra checks on your work, extra ones to what you used to have in terms of the normal system that you went through. File your copy, editor reads it, sub reads it, revise sub reads it. Your now thinking, as well as all those checks in [REDACTED] there's readers who are going to look at it. And you know, yeah, you'll get some

ridiculous, horrendous views and stupid comments, but you'll also get some really informed readers as well, you know, who know their stuff. Really know their stuff inside out. They're not just emotional about it. So they're a real force for good, really.

TB: Do you ever play – sometimes it's termed the longer game – maybe sitting on certain stories that you've got for the sake of not alienating a contact, maybe with the prospect of a bigger story down the line.

Int8: Yeah, you have to do that.

TB: Do you regard that as self-censorship or do you regard that as just being pragmatic in your professional practice?

Int8: Yeah, I think the different strands to your question there, I think pragmatic in terms of like sitting on a story and thinking, umm, when's the right time, when's the right time to run that? Umm, if you had a story that's... I think the other thing with that is that there will be times when you have to write something that a contact of yours isn't going to be overly chuffed with. I was doing [REDACTED] book when [REDACTED] were on their way to winning the league and [REDACTED] got sent off in that game against [REDACTED]. And I was round his house the next day, the next morning. As it would happen it was the one night I'd stayed up because [REDACTED] played West Ham on the Sunday and we did another interview for the book on the Monday. And I do remember sitting there in that press room on the Sunday afternoon at [REDACTED], and I was asked to write a big news piece about [REDACTED] being not just sent off, but his reaction to the incident, possibly meaning that he was going to get another game ban. Umm, and I did feel a bit uncomfortable with it, because the last thing I wanted him to do was get another game ban, because I wanted [REDACTED] to win the league because I was doing the book and I was friendly with him. You know, we went to his wedding that year. And then it does become a bit tricky. But in a way it doesn't. Because everyone's going to read your article. They're not just going to read it if they buy [REDACTED] the next day. They're going to read it online. You've got to tell it like it is. And as long as I'm fair in what I'm writing, I don't see that [REDACTED] or anyone else can have any complaints about it. But I'd be lying if I said it didn't cross my mind when I'm typing there at six o'clock that evening. thinking, I've got to put it out there now that [REDACTED] running the risk of getting another ban which no doubt some people might think, you know, your close to [REDACTED] or whatever, well, you're giving the FA a reason to have a go. Other papers would have been doing the same but obviously my relationship with [REDACTED] was different. But you've got to be true to yourself, haven't you? And as long as you write that fairly I don't see how anyone could have any comeback with you. In terms of stories, umm, have I sat on stuff? Yeah, I think I've tended to sit on stuff normally because I haven't quite been able to stand something up. I don't feel I've got enough – I've got 75 per cent, I feel I need a little bit more. Umm, but I don't think I'd ever have... The other reason you said is that you'd feel like you could damage your contacts or something like that, you said that, didn't you? You might sort of self-censor – I don't want to run this because it might cause an issue with that contact?

TB: Yeah, I was just wondering – maybe I was putting words in your mouth there – but really I'm just trying to say, what might be, there might be a number of reasons that might

motivate what's not always a conscious decision maybe to self-censor. That's maybe the tricky thing, maybe some of it's sometimes unacknowledged to oneself.

Int8: Yeah. No I don't. I always come back to the point, I know sometimes I'm going to write stuff and people I've got to know and got to like aren't going to be happy with it. But you've just got to be honest and true to yourself. I mean there's managers I've got on well with. I remember Garry Monk getting sacked at Swansea and you've got to write where it's all gone wrong. And, you know, it's someone I could take and exchange calls with and get on really well with to this day, but you're going to have to write some negative stuff in there, you know, and you can't not. And I think, you know, if you see other people who... you'd see straight through them and you do with some people, who don't want to be overly critical of someone because you're worried about damaging the relationship. That's not really journalism, is it? You may as well be working for the club.

TB: Which takes me on to the next question, which is to what extent do clubs' press officers influence that output that you produce?

Int8: Yeah, umm, it's an interesting one really, because they obviously vary greatly from club to club. You know, I think you can have a pro-active press officer, someone who's on the front foot dealing with stuff and is probably controlling things more in that way because they're being... I say "controlling", but they're... If you sit back and say nothing, and some clubs don't brief heavily on some things, I don't think you can have an awful lot of criticism in terms of what people then subsequently write. Umm, you know, I've had rows and arguments with press officers who are trying to tell me black is white. I think you as a journalist, you respect someone a lot more when they come on and say, "Look, this is off the record, but I can't defend this. It's happened. Write what you need to write on it. I'm not going to try and influence you." And there are others who are probably getting it in the neck from someone above who's saying, you know, they know that the following morning their chief exec or whoever's going to be on to them saying, "Why's this come out like that." But, no, I don't have, umm... The only thing I'll say is what I do find frustrating now, and it has influenced my approach a little, is that I've had stories and I've run them by a press officer, which is what we've always been taught is the right way to do something, even if you've stood it up completely, to tell them, "Look, I've got this story, just to let you know I'm writing it, have you got any comment you'd like to make on it?" Or sometimes just to say, "I'm just marking your card here, this story's going up in the next ten minutes." What I've done a couple of times over the last few years is sometimes – I've always been told, ring the club, let them know – and then they've taken ages to get back to me when I've said it isn't going up in 10 minutes. You know, "Just to let you know, I'm writing this story," and they've said, "Fine, I'll go away and speak to someone about it." And they've taken bloody ages and by the time they've come back the story's gone out on social media in a way it wouldn't have done years ago when you'd have had more time. Then you think, right, I've done the job in the right way by going to you through all the proper methods that I've always been taught, and by doing that I've kind of lost out. So it has made me feel now sometimes at some clubs, you know what if I've got that story and I trust my source 100 per cent, I'm not going to bother. All I will do is say, "This story's going out," and not actually say to them "Can I have a comment on them." I don't think press officers have... the influence they have with me more is just over a can I get an interview set up or not? In terms of a

story, not so much. Yeah, sometimes they'll argue the case and sort of say, "Well, that's not a story," and you think, "Well, it is a story, you're just trying to pressurise me into not running something." Umm, those relationships are, you know, important. You want to know that you can get on with people at clubs because you will have to put stuff to them sometimes. But as I say it has made me think recently, if I trust it I'll just go with it.

TB: In the past there's been this description sometimes of the sports desk, the sports journalism department, being the toy department of the news operations. Sometimes sports journalists have been described as "cheerleaders" rather than as fulfilling a watchdog-type function. Do you think that has any merit today? How do you see it in terms of your day-to-day role but also maybe the wider UK sports journalism industry?

Int8: What, that we're spending too much time basically kind of just going along reporting on games and all the rest, and not holding people to account enough?

TB: That's one facet of it, yeah: the cheerleading function rather than the watchdog function. I mean, but then it ties in with the debate, doesn't it, of to a certain extent maybe some desks being led by audience figures.

Int8: Yeah, and I'd say time's a big factor. We're being asked to do more than we ever did, you know. Back in 2004 I gave you that example, that's when I started, that example of being told to have a quiet day today because there's not room in the paper, which would just never happen now. If you're going to do investigative work you need the time to do that. And it can be hugely frustrating if you're trying to do that and then someone says, "Stu, can you just do this for us? Can you do that for us?" Games, you know, I've got three games this week, they take up a lot of time, not just in terms of being there, covering them, doing your research, travelling, all of it. So you need a newspaper to invest in a David Conn-type figure to do that and say, "That's your remit. It might take you two, three weeks working on that, maybe longer, to get a story, but we're happy with that. We're not expecting you to serve up something every day." But then, in many ways, but in many ways I guess for a lot of papers that wouldn't be, they wouldn't want to put resource into something like that, because it's that constant churn of stuff that they need. Umm. Could we do more generally in the industry? I guess you could always do more but I think, I think... I don't think we are cheerleaders. You can't have it both ways. People will say that the England team have been brutally criticised for years by the press, and then you know everyone gets on their backs in the summer when they're saying, "Well, what are you doing? They haven't beaten any good country," and they got to the semi-finals. So you can't have it both ways. I think, if anything, we're often – certainly in terms of England and stuff – of being overly negative and too critical. You know, and if stories are put out that fans... I think football supporters as well. It's like, when you write about their club, with a lot of them it's like worse than you writing about their partner. That's how I see it. They are so emotional about their club and quite irrational at times in anything. They'll only see good, and even if that player has been an absolute pain in the arse at that club and done lots of bad things, for his time at the club he's fine. Once he's gone they'll say anything negative about him. And so, yeah, I don't... I think, I think we do a reasonable job in the circumstances of holding clubs to account. You know, we certainly don't readily accept, I mean, clubs put more out than they ever did before in terms of their

websites and things like that and we don't readily accept that information. We do question things. But one of the issues I'd say today which is very hard is access. How many people can pick up the phone and speak to owners of Premier League clubs these days? Twenty years ago it probably would have been totally different, but with the number of foreign investors here, you know, there are far more people working, there are far more people in that chain, there's more people working in PR these days, so you're more and more detached from the person at the top. And I think that does make it a lot harder. Sometimes clubs will moan and say, you know, "You haven't properly sourced that," and you think, well, when can we ever speak to your – that's not an excuse for not sourcing a story properly – but we don't get access to a, you know, chief executive or a chairman. They're few and far between really. So that then changes your contacts and that then means you become more heavily reliant on people who are actually a bit on the periphery but who you trust, like agents who do a lot of stuff at clubs. So your whole way of going about the job shifts really, err. But, yeah, I mean press officers they obviously still have an important role to play, umm, but for me it's often about trying to sort out interviews through them really. If I'm ringing a press officer to check out a story, part of me feels – not to check out – say I'm ringing them to ask about something, part of me feels I've failed. Because I think, really, I should be able to get hold of someone higher up at the club. But bear in mind everything I've just said, that's quite tricky. So at Stoke I could ring Peter Coates and try and check something out with him off the record. At other clubs, at Leicester for example, it's much harder to do that. And then the head of comms or press officer's role becomes more important because they might be the only person you can go to to say, "Look, is this happening?" Yeah.

TB: Last few questions now, more about your sense of shifting identity of what it is to be a sports journalist in the digital age. And you've already kind of answered this to an extent in that you've spoken about ways in which it's almost raised the bar in terms of professional standards. But do you think, well, quite generally, how has the continued growth of social media/digital affected your sense of what it is to be a sports journalist? If you think back to the start of your career do you...

Int8: Yeah, I guess with it comes like, for some, a profile, which I'm never comfortable with. I don't feel that personally, but I think it has given some journalists – the more senior football reporters at some papers – increased status that they wouldn't have had before. I think there'd be a far greater awareness of who the leading football reporters are now then there would have been 15, 20 years ago. I think they've got a profile they didn't have before. Some of them would probably say that brings as many negatives as positives with it in terms of the comments they're subjected to. Me personally, I love my job and I've got so much respect for the journalism industry, and it's really important what we do, but it's not that important. We're not saving lives. Do you know what I mean? And I think sometimes that gets lost on some people. I think you've spoken to me enough today to know I take so much pride in my job but I also do think I'm not trying to think we're something we're not. You know, we're football journalists. And that's where I worry sometimes with social media, that it gives people a status and a profile that they're in danger of reading too much in to, which I never would. I just kind of think, as I say, there's people doing far more important things. But I certainly think it has raised the bar in terms of your job, because if you write a flyer now – a transfer story flyer – I've seen it, I follow people who've done that, people will give them no end of stick on social media, copying in what people are saying about them as well.

Well, that can't be nice for anyone to read. Now maybe somebody wrote that story with all the right intentions and they were fed bad information. But maybe they didn't. Maybe sometimes people do think, do you know what, I mean years ago you had to ring up with three lines – give us three stories you've got today and three things you're working on. Maybe there aren't three stories, Tom. Maybe that led some people to sometimes think, "Do you know what, I might just have to put a bit of a flyer – a chancer – out there." I don't think it's so easy to do that now, I really don't. I think years ago somebody might have read that just in that paper and no-one would have ever got to... the only place they could have put something I guess would have been on a fan site or something like that, you know. But now I just think you are scrutinised far more and that has to have affected the way people go about doing their job. You know, you have got a degree of self-censorship there that you talked about before because there's a little part in your mind – there must be – you're sat there typing away, thinking "Have I got this absolutely right? How's it going to be perceived? How's it going to go down?" And that doesn't mean you're allowing a few clowns to sort of dictate to you. All it does with is it just raises that bar a little bit higher than it already was. I'm thinking, I want to have this absolutely nailed on. I don't want anyone to be able to come on here afterwards and say, and pick a little hole in this that I've overlooked.

TB: And how, if in any way, how has the rhythm of your week been affected by, umm, changes in the digital environment and social media? Or has it not, do you just continue that process?

Int8: It's a good question. Well, I'd say now I do less structured stuff. At one point I used to go to a lot of press conferences. They're no longer so interested in those routine press conferences. So I'd have gone to Villa every week when they were in the Premier League years ago. I'd have gone to Birmingham or West Brom whereas I very rarely now go to a press conference because... If I was covering a higher-profile patch it would be different. But I think for those of us who don't cover higher-profile patches they kind of look at that stuff now and think, anyone and everyone has got that. The Press Association are there and also those kind of press conferences aren't going to generate the clicks that you're talking about. Years ago when it was put everything up it was fine. Now, when they're looking at numbers in far greater depth than they ever were before they're not going to think it's a great use of my time to go along there doing that which not many people will want to read, to be honest. And, secondly, err, secondly, you could just be using your time far better to work on something that's more unique that we'll have to ourselves. So that has meant for me I don't have that structure of, you know, press conferences, that I did, err, in the past. I've probably got now, which is why we spent so long trying to meet up, I've probably got now more licence to do stuff kind of ad hoc really. Umm, and I enjoy that freedom. I wouldn't have that freedom if I was working in Manchester or Merseyside or London – Chelsea, Arsenal, Tottenham – covering the bigger clubs because I'd still have to do that staple diet of press conference. But, for me, I think because it isn't so high profile it's meant that that doesn't fit the clicks, so my job has shifted.

TB: Yeah. And do you regard what you do within the sports journalism industry, do you see it as a profession that you have or is it more like a craft, a trade?

Int8: A bit of everything really. I do see it as being a profession, without a doubt. A craft, a trade? Yeah, I do. Umm, I do also think I'm really, I come back to what I said about it not being that important, often people say to you, they look at you in disbelief that you get paid to watch football. But there are, as you know, a lot of hours that go with it. But, no, it's a great privilege to do it but it's definitely a profession. I think of the time I spend trying to write articles, researching people before I go to interview them, umm. In fact, matches as I see as a really – they do take up quite a bit of time – but I see that as a – I wouldn't say a small part of what I do – but I don't see that as the main part of what I do. And actually with matches I often think these days, I enjoy writing match reports but I'd much sooner do a couple of interviews or an interview than a match, when I'm writing something different about someone as opposed to a match. Especially again now in the digital age everyone's... if you haven't been to the game you can find out what happened at the game like that [clicks fingers] everywhere. Which is why we stopped in ██████████ doing Monday match reports which we used to do for a long time on Saturday games. Ok, it wasn't a blow by blow but it was still a scoreline on the top and, you know, a theme from the game, and now we don't do any of that for Monday because the feeling was, you know, and it was quite a big decision because it had been like it for absolutely years and you'll still see a lot of papers still do the scoreline on a Monday, but 48 hours on. Do people still want to read about that game? You know, so that's, that's something that's changed over time as well and I think that's linked with the digital age, you know. I've, you know, the club I support, would I want to go and read a match report about a game I went to see on Saturday this morning? Not really, no. So that's shifted things. I'd just rather, I think now more and more you want to have unique stuff. I think that's something that the digital age and social media has pushed as well. Being able to put something up there that's unique. It might not be a breaking news story, it might be an interview you've done on your own that you can, otherwise you're just sort of... there's so much you see on social media as well is, you know, 20 people tweeting the same thing about the same press conference they're at, the same quotes. And I get it, you know, they're kind of feeding their fan base if I can call it that, their Twitter followers. But I like being able to do something different. That's the buzz of the job for me.

TB: Yeah. Penultimate question. How firm do you think the distinction is today between sports journalism and sports PR? It sounds like in your own practice it's very firm, but maybe looking at it more generally.

Int9: Go on, give me, explain a bit more.

TB: Well, clearly you were talking there about how you, in your previous answer, how you pride yourself on getting a buzz from unique content...

Int8: ... Yeah...

TB: ... provided you can get the access through a club's PR, you will do that unique content. But with clubs having a lot of investment now, a lot of resource in their media departments...

Int8: ... With what they put out...



TB: ... and the size of followings that those clubs have arguably I think, it's speculative, but for some grazing readers maybe there's a blurring in readers' minds about what's club content and what's independent journalism...

Int8: ... Yeah, yeah...

TB: ... or maybe readers are wiser than that, but I just wonder what you think given how much – you mentioned it earlier – there is more PR these days in sports clubs, football clubs.

Int8: Yeah. I very rarely, I very rarely. I mean stuff is put out by a club. The only stuff I occasionally take that I can think of really is, umm, if a manager say has been sacked or appointed then you might use a paragraph of quotes from the chairman or the vice-chairman or whatever explaining who they've appointed. The vast majority I see really as being for fans and not for journalists. I see a real distinction with that. You know, going to a club for – I wouldn't say it's my last port of call – but it's never in my mind to think, to even think... You know what, that is a shift from years ago. Because years ago I probably would have clicked on club websites. Maybe I still should, I don't know. First thing on a morning to see what's on there. I wouldn't even look now, which probably says it all. I look at Twitter now and again to see what they've been putting out, but I just regard that as for a totally different readership. That's for supporters, it's nothing to do with journalists, so I think there is a clear line. What there is now though there's more and more people working in sports PR, not directly employed by clubs. And I've used those people sometimes for interview access, and I've found it really, really helpful for two reasons. One, they can set up interviews quite quickly without any fuss; and, umm, two, hey can set interviews up in an environment away from the club, where I feel the player speaks more freely, much more relaxed, you haven't got a press officer sat on your shoulder, which never inhibits me, but I always worry it inhibits the player. I've got my questions, I'm going to go for it, and I'm going to go for it whether they're there or not, you know. And if they want to cut across a subject they think is inappropriate, which would be very rare, so be it. But I always worry that the person sat there is not speaking as openly and honestly as he would if the press officer wasn't there. And nearly all interviews now would happen with someone sat in on you like that. There's only a few clubs I can think of now where people would just leave you be and think, "Do you know what, I trust that person." They'd probably turn around and say to me, "It's not about not trusting you, it's just about being a support for the player." But that's why I like doing stuff through sports PR companies outside of football, because I might also end up getting the player's number at the end of it, which becomes useful for the future. But it becomes very hard to sit there in front of a press officer and say at the end of the interview, "Oh, can I have your number please?" because the press officer would say you shouldn't be doing that. So it's nice to get out of that environment when I can and use, umm, and use the sort of sports PR companies.

TB: Yeah. And, finally, what do you think are the **essential characteristics** that define sports journalists today then?

Int8: Err, [laughs] **social media, thick-skinned. You need to be thick-skinned.** Err, you've obviously got to be diligent and hard-working and willing to put in all sorts of hours of work, yeah, really flexibly. You've got to be able to cope with pressure – a lot of pressure. Again



I'm keeping this relative, Tom, I'm not thinking of saving lives and that. But the whole thing of being able to turn stuff around quickly, umm, you know, on-the-whistle reports and things like that, and reacting fast to changes. So, yeah, you've got to have that sort of clarity in your mind; not being stressed, really. And it is stress. Err, **inquisitive mind. The ability to question and scrutinise people**. Umm, and being able to take criticism, for sure, probably more from people outside than from your employer. Err, and just that, you know, **just trying to be true to yourself really, which sounds a bit corny and clichéd but by that I mean sort of, you know, acting with integrity and honesty when you're writing and that responsibility that comes with who you work for as well.**

TB: Great, thank you.

### Theta – Initial Distillation

- Perhaps the predominant theme in the participant's answers is his sense of the digital age putting him under greater scrutiny than pre-digital, and that scrutiny helping to increase the calibre of journalism. "With the digital era there's – I don't know if transparency is the right words – but I think there's a greater sense you're under scrutiny, I think more than you ever were before, through the digital era... feedback on articles through social media, which can be pretty brutal at times... I think what that does, I don't want to say it because always you should take 100 per cent pride in your job anyway and I'd like to think I've always done that, but I think there's that greater awareness now, whether it's subconscious or not, that whatever you're writing through the digital era, it's visible to far more people, and there's a chance for people to interact through that in a way that there probably wasn't previously" (p1). Later, he links the point explicitly to social media, saying social media has brought increased visibility and interaction, and with it increased scrutiny: "Everyone sees what I produce, you know, if they want to. It's going to go out there. [REDACTED] put it on Twitter and everyone can comment on what you've done during that day. And that's something that's come with the digital age, and I think that leads me personally to think, "I want to make sure that everything is absolutely right on that article." Perhaps a tiny bit more now. I said at the start, I always took 100 per cent pride in what I do, whether that's journalism or anything else. But, I want to be sure that everything's right because I know it's going to be scrutinised by, you know, anyone and everyone right down to getting your facts right" (p2). He admits he is "very conscious" of how Twitter will respond to what he posts. "They don't have to be [REDACTED] to read what you're writing, and I think that's, you know, I think that's a big shift. You put something on Twitter, you're very conscious of the reaction. I've mentioned that a lot already, and I do feel for me that's a really big shift that we are, I do feel that's quite a game-changer. Comments under [REDACTED] section are one thing, and they can be quite brutal, but I think the scrutiny you come under through social media generally is one of the biggest changes I've sort of seen in the job... the readers are far broader than they ever were before and they can interact directly with you, and they will" (p3). Later, he explicitly states that he believes social media has raised the standard of sports reporters' work. "So I'm always conscious, thinking, 'This is going to be scrutinised to the nth degree and I want to make sure that I've covered every base.' And I think social media's been good for that, I think generally for journalism. I'd like to think it's raised the standard" (p11). However, he immediately follows that up by stating social media's downsides: "Because of the pressure, the immediacy of trying to break stories, it's made people – some journalists, I think – cut corners and put things up before they should have done. Not always because it's the journalist's fault, it's the editors'" (p11).

- A sense emerges of the angst that this social media era scrutiny engenders. The participant's own high standards and the scrutiny of the social media blogosphere makes publishing a piece "a real personal challenge". "But whenever I press that button, and this I think is a personal challenge, a real personal challenge, I've had with the digital age, I have to be absolutely happy that what I've sent over is the best I could do" (p4). That sense of personal, emotional investment that is stimulated by social media is a motif that occurs later, with the participant admitting to wasting negative energy on Twitter interactions: "Twitter is personal. You're logging on, you're looking at your notifications, something that's coming straight back to you on that feedback. Umm, and, dare I say it, I'm probably as guilty as anyone, of looking at the one or two bad comments instead of the 97, 98 good ones. You know, I dwell on those more and you can waste a lot of emotional energy on that. Too much, too much" (p9-10). However, amid the negativity there are constructive comments by impressively well-informed readers. "You'll get some ridiculous, horrendous views and stupid comments, but you'll also get some really informed readers as well, you know, who know their stuff. Really know their stuff inside out. They're not just emotional about it. So they're a real force for good, really" (p15).
- While the participant says the anticipation of Twitter reaction doesn't inhibit what he produces, the reaction of trolls and twitter users generally is a factor that is before his mind. "On Twitter, err, I'm very conscious, I'm interested as soon as an article goes up what are people thinking about that? What are their views on it?... It doesn't inhibit me, but there's definitely a voice in my head thinking that" (p10). It doesn't cause him to self-censor, although there is pressure. "An element of self-censorship comes into your head for sure, but I don't think it, umm, I don't think it greatly – because of the awareness of what people are gonna come back with. But it only comes into your head, you think I've got to make sure I get this absolutely right; that what I'm saying is spot on" (p15). He returns to this later on, admitting the presence of the self-censoring voice in his head. "You have got a degree of self-censorship there that you talked about before because there's a little part in your mind – there must be – you're sat there typing away, thinking "Have I got this absolutely right? How's it going to be perceived? How's it going to go down?" And that doesn't mean you're allowing a few clowns to sort of dictate to you. All it does with is it just raises that bar a little bit higher than it already was. I'm thinking, I want to have this absolutely nailed on. I don't want anyone to be able to come on here afterwards and say, and pick a little hole in this that I've overlooked" (p20).
- The participant believes self-censorship – in the sense of journalists backing off from writing critical things – is both see-through and a dereliction of duty. "You'd see straight through them and you do with some people, who don't want to be overly critical of someone because you're worried about damaging the relationship. That's not really journalism, is it? You may as well be working for the club" (p17).
- The participant hints that the increased profile enjoyed by some senior football journalists through social media has led to the unhelpful inflation of egos and loss of perspective. "I guess with it comes like, for some, a profile, which I'm never comfortable with. I don't feel that personally, but I think it has given some journalists – the more senior football reporters at some papers – increased status that they wouldn't have had before... Some of them would probably say that brings as many negatives as positives with it in terms of the comments they're subjected to. Me personally, I love my job and I've got so much respect for the journalism industry, and it's really important what we do, but it's not that important. We're not saving lives. Do you know what I mean? And I think sometimes that gets lost on some people... And that's where I worry sometimes with social media, that it gives people a status and a profile that they're in danger of reading too much in to, which I never would. I just kind of think, as I say, there's people doing far more important things" (p19).

- The participant says there is great pressure to produce stories quickly, but that he stands firm in the event of the sports desk leaning on him; he won't compromise on standards for the sake of speed. "Everything should be about accuracy and speed, but sometimes does it become more about speed than accuracy? I don't find that with myself. I won't compromise the way I report on things. And I wouldn't. If I'm not 100 per cent comfortable in doing something then I'm not gonna follow that story. But there is greater pressure through the digital age, I think, because every newspaper wants to get something up first. And then I wonder whether all the checks that we were taught to go through over time – I'm thinking back to journalism school, university – do you have time always to tick all those boxes? And if you don't then tick those boxes does that mean that somethings don't get covered? Is a story sourced in the way it should be, or are you sort of thinking, 'Yeah, I've got most of that, I've stood up perhaps not all of it but I don't want to be second or third to get the story up.' And then becomes down, you know, to a sort of relationship between editors on the desk and the reporter, and being strong enough as a reporter to say, 'You know, I'm not quite comfortable enough to go with this yet'" (p1). And again: "But I'm not going to be – bullied isn't the right word – I'm not going to be pressurised into delivering something before I'm comfortable with doing that" (p2). He suggests this backbone comes through his experience; younger reporters could yield to the pressure. "And I wouldn't have any qualms, in the way that a younger reporter would, in saying, 'I'm sorry, I can't stand this up at the minute, I'm waiting for someone to come back to me'" (p3). His own very high personal standards mean he does not settle for anything less than what he is entirely happy with. "And that's quite challenging with the digital age because of what I said at the start: the pressures that you come under to file faster – faster, and faster, and faster. And I found myself fighting against that, thinking... My boss, [REDACTED], has said to me many times, "[REDACTED], it does not have to be one hundred per cent. Sometimes it can be, you know, ninety per cent, it can be seventy per cent." And I'm thinking, "No." Because the reader's not going to look at that and be thinking, "Oh, you were told you could only do it seventy per cent" (p4). However, he believes reporters on other mainstream titles don't source things themselves but instead churn others' copy out of a fear of being criticised by their sports editors. "I'm waiting for calls back, and I feel comfortable saying that. Umm, I do think others might feel, 'Do you know what? I believe what [REDACTED] have done there, or *The Sun*, I know that reporter, he always gets stuff right, I'm going to go with it too.' I think they would do that. I think they'd do that to save themselves a bollocking" (p5).
- The participant sees duty as multi-faceted but sees his first duty as to his readers. "I think you have a, yeah, a duty to inform readers. Certainly to be fair and honest with your reporting. Accuracy, obviously. Umm, I think we do have a responsibility as well to, umm, hold people to account" (p3).
- Honesty and truthfulness are the most important ethical qualities for a sports journalist, even if that means upsetting a contact and jeopardising the relationship. Scrutiny emerges as something that the participant both *does* (to the powerful in sport) and has *done to him* (by the digital-age audience). "You've obviously got to be honest and truthful in the way you go about your work. Honest and truthful to yourself, not just to your readers and the people you work for... And it can be hard at times when you, if you get to know someone who becomes a good contact and then things unravel. But you've got to report fairly and impartially, you know, that's the key thing. You'd never want anyone to sort of look at your writing and feel there's a level of bias there or you're not scrutinising people in the way that you should" (p4).
- Editors' Code of Practice barely registers on the participant's radar. "It's a totally different strand that isn't directly applicable to my job. Of course I'm aware of it, but I can't sit here and say to you now, "I consult it often, I look at it often," because it doesn't really impact on me, I feel. I can't even say on a regular basis, it hardly ever does. Yes, I'm aware of it, but 99

per cent of my work isn't gonna stray into those areas" (p5-6). Compliance with the code is effectively devolved to the sports desk. "Their scrutiny would be as much if not more than that code of conduct, code of practice... all those questions would be asked by them at the outset... That's exactly the reason why I wouldn't feel the need to consult it because - I'm in danger of making ██████████ sound like the greatest thing in the world – but I'm just trying to say that there are checks in place at the outset that mean I do not have to be referencing that" (p6). However, a minority of sports journalists, those doing investigative work ("a different line of work"), might use it: "Sports journalism doesn't readily bring you into that – with someone like David Conn it might more often, who's writing financial stories and stories questioning the way clubs are being run etcetera. He does a brilliant job. It's investigative reporting – that's what I'm looking for – he's doing a different line of work" (p6).

- The participant worked with a reporter, Raoul Simons, who was arrested as part of Operation Weeting, the police inquiry into phone hacking. "They were sort of doing what I was really in terms of just having a few clubs that you cover... Raoul was one of them... Lovely guy as well. Terrific bloke" (p13).
- The participant's sense of frustration at editorial decisions made on the evidence of audience metrics – including declining word counts – is almost palpable, and he admits to having had arguments with senior colleagues. "I think there's too much emphasis on, I think it's guided far too much by internet hits. And that really is a source of frustration for me... I really enjoy long-form journalism, I think that's restricted me. Really, really frustrated me. So word counts have come down quite significantly. And now to do a long-form piece of journalism it's far harder than it ever was before, because the feeling being... Look, they've got data to back it up and they'll put it to me. I've had arguments with this with senior people at ██████████ ... It disappoints me because I kind of think, well, that basically means we're saying that the people who are judging how much we write now are the people who are purely the readers. I'm not saying they shouldn't have a say, obviously, but I think it's a two-way relationship. Sometimes something might not generate a massive number of hits but it might be a really well-received article and that should still have a place in my eyes" (p7).
- However, the participant is in agreement with ██████████ policy of content reduction (fewer articles being published online each day) – a reversal of earlier policies of putting as much content online as possible. This he views as sensible quality control. "When the internet first came into being really at ██████████ we started pushing it. We would put everything online. Anything and everything would go on there. And then, over time, there came this realisation that, actually, less is more in a way. So we file fewer stories now... So, umm, and that hasn't necessarily been a bad thing. I think content reduction is very different to restricting word counts, umm, because I think you need some quality control" (p8).
- Workload has risen sharply in the digital era, says the participant in forceful terms. "I think the work level – the amount of work you produce now – is far, far greater than ever before. Again, when I think back to 2004 when I started, sometimes you'd ring up and an editor would say, umm... I actually remember Mourinho leaving Chelsea the first time and being told – I can't remember what I was going off to do, maybe something at Villa, but it was like, 'There's unlikely to be any space today so don't, you know, don't break your neck kind of thing on anything.' That just wouldn't happen now, you know? There's always space on the internet, it's as simple as that" (p1).
- The participant states in all seriousness that he would resign if asked to do some of the articles that are now used online by more tabloid-style outlets. He cites the example of a story that was based on a photo of Manchester City players wearing woolly hats at a railway station. "In my eyes it isn't journalism... Anyone can do that. Anyone can write that from an office. You're not ringing anyone, you've not got contacts. It's not a story. Someone's

editor's just said, "Here's some photos we've got in, can you write to those pictures?" Then someone's going to turn around to me and say, "Well, Stu, you're wrong that is journalism today. You've got to move with the times." But if I was asked to do that I wouldn't do it. I'd find another job, Tom. I would" (p12).

- Rather than viewing football journalists as cheerleaders, the participant views English journalists as the opposite, of being "overly negative and too critical" (p18).
- The excitement of the job for the participant is providing something unique, which he believes social media can both facilitate and undermine. "I think now more and more you want to have unique stuff. I think that's something that the digital age and social media has pushed as well. Being able to put something up there that's unique. It might not be a breaking news story, it might be an interview you've done on your own that you can, otherwise you're just sort of... there's so much you see on social media as well is, you know, 20 people tweeting the same thing about the same press conference they're at, the same quotes. And I get it, you know, they're kind of feeding their fan base if I can call it that, their Twitter followers. But I like being able to do something different. That's the buzz of the job for me" (p21).

## Interviewee 9 - Iota

### Transcript:

TB: Opening question then [REDACTED] – there's an emphasis here very much on your personal experience in the industry – and I just wonder in your experience what are the main ethical issues as you see it facing sports journalists in the course of their work?

Int9: I think at the moment the racial issue obviously brought back right to the fore with the whole Raheem Sterling issue is very, very key to us at the moment. As you can imagine at [REDACTED] and I'm sure you're on top of everything that's going on, my big issue at the moment is both an ethical one and a moral one because I have to make sure we get the story right but then there's this nagging thing in the back of our minds about are we either positively or negatively portraying someone, either intentionally or unintentionally, and that is a real tight rope for us at the moment, umm, and I think that broadly goes across into the way you look at a story anyway. My golden rule with everything is I'm the first reader so therefore when I put things in the paper am I portraying things as a reader would see it or am I putting some sort of, umm, 'political' is the wrong word, but in a sport sense a spin on something, am I trying to lead a reader into something they shouldn't be led in to? We often do some hopefully funny things with stories but that should only be the case when the story's right to do so, so we're on real tightrope at the moment with everything that's happened over the last few months.

TB: And as you say that's a very contemporary issue around a specific ethical dilemma or there any others that reflecting, looking back over your career, any others that you sort of see as being maybe sort of pivotal or form day-to-day thought processes for you?

Int9: Yeah, I mean back when I was reporting [REDACTED] and then now taken through to when I'm in the office and taking stories from reporters in similar scenarios, you know, we have this whole sporting debate over private life and public life, and you know that's very difficult at [REDACTED] as well. I'll often walk into news conference in the morning and the news pages will have a story about a personal issue or a, you know, dare I say a married life issue, or anything like that, you know, we've had illegitimate children, debates over sexuality, all those sorts of things, and it's, umm, something that you have to weigh up because, to me, is it in the public interest is the first key thing. And the second very, very quick question after that: has the players done something wrong that would legitimate doing a story about it. So, I think, well, without revealing the name of the player, we've had a story very recently about Leicester City where there was an accusation of a player going on a night out after the helicopter crash. Umm, and as it turned out the player didn't have any idea the helicopter had crashed because of the timeframe, and obviously there are moral and ethical issues around that, whether you print the story or not even if he did know, umm, you know, because of how people deal with grief and the different interpretations of that. So, yeah, it's a pretty regular debate I've got to admit.

TB: Yeah, yeah. You mentioned there about viewing yourself as almost the "first reader", umm, and the question I want to ask is whether you think, as a sports journalist, you've got

a sense of duty, or duties, to anybody, and if you do have a duty who is it to, is it to readers, is it to the people you're reporting on?

Int9: I think both, absolutely to both. And I think the line, the other side of the line to the things I was just talking about is the, if we're too soft and we let people get away with things they shouldn't be allowed to get away with then we're not doing our job first and foremost you know, which is, you know... I think there's a broad term of holding society to account which journalists have to abide by and, you know, there's no way we wouldn't print a story if it had negatively affected the public in any way. You know, obviously in sport, it's most of the time slightly less than in news stories and court stories and criminality, but we still, I absolutely feel that we have a duty to ourselves to begin with as fans, because the first thing I say to anyone who works on our sports desk is "We are fans" and therefore if there's something at our clubs that is winding us up and riling us then it's a story, because that is something that fans at those clubs want to read about and want to know about. If it's something that we don't care about then I would hazard a guess that it's something our readers don't want to know about either. So, yeah, we absolutely have a duty to football, to sport in a broader sense – obviously football being our number one sport – but, you know, very recently we had a long debate about the ticket prices at the new Tottenham stadium, there was a story that was on the back pages of a lot of the papers and actually we didn't do it on the back page. Umm, we did it inside – and, you know, the long debate about how fans would feel about ticket prices going up a new stadium and whether that was just a fact of life because it's a brand new stadium, it's supply and demand, it's bound to be more expensive, or actually it's bang out of order from the club itself. So clearly on that story different sports desks dealt with it in different ways. But, on your original point, I would say it's all three: it's our duty to the clubs, the fans and the game itself, as well as to the paper and to society. It's a balancing act and I don't think we ever lay down term a, b and c in any particular order, I think eventually we get to the point where there's an instinct that "No, no we've got to print that, we have to print that," or "No, no that's crossing the line," you know, that's not going to do anyone any favours either for the paper, the person or sport itself, so, umm, again, yeah, quite a fine balance sometimes.

TB: Yeah. And you mentioned there instinct and sometimes, you know, journalists talk about that sense of what a story is and when you need to run with something. How much does instinct sort of differ from, you know, kind of cool, considered judgement as it were, or is it the case maybe that that instinct arises having gone through a process of sort of reflection and judgement?

Int9: I think, yeah, again there's two sides to that where, you know, the day as it goes on there will be dare I say run-of-the-mill stories that we know are coming and we have a chat over and we, and then there – I'm going to quote something unbelievable that Kelvin MacKenzie phrased, and it's in the book *Stick it Up Your Punter*, which was the, we used to refer to – well they referred to it – as the FMD moment and excuse my language but that's "Fuck me, Doris, have you seen this?" And when, to [REDACTED], when you turn a page and you see a story and you go "wow" – that same instinct we have when a reporter phones up or we see something on a website now, or Twitter, or something breaks on a TV station. You know when a story slaps you in the face, it's one that, you know, the readers are going to enjoy, and again different newspapers... you know, we didn't go heavily into the drugs in

cycling stories, alright we covered it off but that would be an exciting story to a particular readership, you know. You flip that on its head and some of the, you know, the story of Scotland in the last couple of days for example where to our readers they're seeing a bit of fun – "Oh my goodness, Scotland have lost to Kazakhstan". You know, our readers will go, "Oh my God, have you seen this? Scotland got beat 3-0 by Kazakhstan" and we feel like that on the desk. You know, hopefully we've had a bit less to drink than the average reader in the pub, but I think in the newsroom we react in the same way as a fan in the pub would when someone tells them a story, and that instinct of what is new, of what is interesting and what is news is, umm, I suppose we're pretty natural at it, but we'll react in the same way as any other reader does, it's just how we interpret the story and how we present it to the reader for our particular readership.

TB: You mention about negotiating a tightrope with the race stuff at the moment, and what do you think are the most important ethical qualities a sports journalist should possess, or should aim to cultivate, in the course of their work?

Int9: I think it's just fairness. And, you know, as long as... we often – and [REDACTED], the head of sport, often uses that phrase, and it's a brilliant one for all of us to remember, is "Is that fair?". You know, and when we're either going to poke fun at something, you know, we would never poke fun at something that was crass or, you know, there were serious issues around, but we'd poke fun at things that, you know... as I say, the Kazakhstan-Scotland one is a prime example. They got beaten, the fans were absolutely up in arms, they hadn't done their duty, they hadn't done what the paying public and the paying fans want them to do so I think they're due a little bit of fun poked at them. But then on the more serious racial stories and whatever, is it fair? You know, if we're publishing something that is close to the line or is a sensitive story, are we publishing it in a way that's fair and accurate? You know, is it true first and foremost, and is it fair? I should emphasise the point of true because clearly we absolutely can't, despite what some readers might think about the tabloid papers, we absolutely can't print something that's false, otherwise we'd find ourselves in real legal issues. The Raheem Sterling issue is going to run and run and run and what I find incredibly interesting about the Raheem Sterling thing is, is a player – not necessarily Raheem – but is a player going to escape being held to account because of his race because papers are now being sensitive – or not just papers, the media in general – being sensitive about what's being said about stereotyping in the media? You know, and if it's unfair that we publish something then absolutely we shouldn't publish, but if a player has done something wrong and we should publish, or they've been sent off or they've done, you know, there have been issues with confronting fans, and crowds, and violence and all those things added together, we shouldn't be looking at the colour of their skin and their race when we're trying to hold someone to account. So, again, there's this really delicate balance between, crikey, are we going to get the public have a right go at us because they're going to say "Oh, you're only doing that story because it's Raheem Sterling or because of the colour of his skin" or are we going to be accused of being too soft because now we've bent back the other way? And, you know, that's a real debate for us in the office at the moment.

TB: Yeah. And, umm, you mention about a debate in the office, where is that you think sports journalists get their professional values from? Is it from that kind of just being in a newsroom setting or is it more personal values that are brought to bear on judgements?



Int9: I would say from a personal, my personal point of view, it's come from being part of a team for a long time. And you know I've played in sports teams and I've been part of sports teams and I look at the newsdesk like a dressing room and you've got certain characters who need an arm around the shoulder and you've got certain characters who need a rocket but amidst of all of that we hopefully get to the right result with what we do every evening. You know, if one of us is struggling hopefully somebody else is picking up the slack. In this current world where there are less people in newsrooms and in football grounds reporting than there used to be that's really important. And to me as a lot of nights leading that team, sometimes I sit there and don't get involved because, you know, if someone else is doing the business. As a football analogy, if the main man is banging goals in then I don't have to worry and there are other nights where I have to sort of rally the troops and get people going, you know, on occasion dish out a bollocking or whatever else, but that's just pretty standard. On all the values, I would hope that most of us share the same one: we want, for the good of the paper, for the good of the reader, to produce the best possible product every night and, to me, the back page of [REDACTED] is the most important page in journalism every day. And I nervously look at, you know, Twitter of an evening, or the BBC feed of an evening, to see the other back pages and often to the annoyance of my wife if she's next to me in bed because I'm lying awake waiting to see what the other papers have done, and that sort of drive to get the best product is hopefully what makes [REDACTED] back page as respected and read most nights if not all nights. It's a team environment and as soon as someone gets a bit too self-important they'll soon get knocked down in the newsroom environment and, umm, you know, quite rightly so. The reporters out on the road, they have a duty to provide us with a great list and we have to duty to provide them with a great paper as a result of that list. I think there's a sort of unwritten rule there that everyone knows.

TB: Yes. What bearing do the Editors' Code of Practice and other regulatory codes have on your work?

Int9: Oh, absolutely huge. We all have to abide by all of the codes of conduct. We have our own code of conduct as well as obviously the more general ones across the industry. We have, we regularly have to take refresher courses and tests on things like the Bribery Commission and things like that to make sure everyone's well aware of all the rules and legal ramifications. We have a lawyer sat, you know, within throwing distance of our desk every day, he comes over to check basically every hour. They read every word in the paper, the legal team. You know, and all of us are pretty well up on legal issues now and historically the mistakes that have been made in the journalism industry, hopefully we won't be making any mistakes like that again because we're all so well-versed. The editor, just by the structure of our day, from the lists that we have to produce and the meetings we have – we have an early conference, we then have what we call early plot where we put each stories in pages, and then we have a late plot where we tell the editor what's on each page. And so just, just from those things, it almost self-polices it because you know you can't, you can't go into late plot with a story that is, umm, is legally suspect or any story that is going to get us in any trouble of any degree, so we have to have done that work, that research and have that knowledge before you get to that point each day. And on the very, very rare occasion – and I'm glad to say it is very, very rare now – that there is a mistake, or there is something

that, umm, that we do wrong, then, you know, if it does get reported to IPSO or otherwise, we put apologies in the paper for things we have no complaints about from IPSO. But, you know, if it does go to IPSO there's a place in the paper on page two where we would write an apology for. We on sport made a mistake a couple of weeks ago in the first [REDACTED] [REDACTED] game where it wasn't anything malicious it was just a wording of a quote was wrong which made it sound like [REDACTED] at the [REDACTED] game. They absolutely didn't do that, we regret that the wording of the paragraph made it sound that way and so the next morning, you know, we printed a response, an apology, and made sure we put that right. And, you know, thankfully – touch wood – those mistakes are few and far between, but, you know, *all those practices have to be really strictly adhered to and otherwise the paper wouldn't be there very long with the current legal issues and all the IPSO regulations that we have to stick to.*

TB: Yeah. Umm, I mean in your experience have you ever encountered behaviour that you regard as being a flagrant breach of media law or ethical codes?

Int9: *I haven't, not that extreme.* I haven't, I haven't experienced that extreme, no, but I mean I have, I have – I can't think of a specific example off the top of my head – but there are definitely occasions where it does make you wonder if a reporter or an agency, umm, have even read what they've written. Where, you know, absolutely cannot print, you know, what they've written. You do wonder sometimes whether they're aware of these things. *But in a way that's what the desk is for, you know, and I wouldn't pretend that I have anywhere near the nose for sniffing out a story in the reporters' environment as some of our top reporters, but my job in there is almost to police that as well, I would say. Yeah, there have definitely been occasions where you read paragraphs and you think, crikey, if that was in the paper we'd be walking into a court room within a week. Umm, but I wouldn't say, you know, a flagrant sort of, you know, disregard for rules – more ignorance, I think, would be the real offence. But yeah, again, gladly those things are few and far between.* We just have to be very careful these days with social media and things like that where members of the public will post things they're not aware of legal ramifications and, umm, you know, there can be the problem in a digital world of people copying and pasting without thinking and that's one of the... a major issue for all publications I would say at the moment.

TB: Yeah. What about the prevalence or otherwise of phone hacking on sports desks? Obviously it was something that was brought to light primarily on news desks or for news reporters, have you come across that at all or heard any tales of that circulating around sports desks in Fleet Street?

Int9: No. No, absolutely not. I've not heard any of it. I mean, I didn't actually work on staff at *The News of the World*, I used to do match reports for them on a Saturday [REDACTED]

*But, no, I didn't hear, I didn't come across anything at all. One of the most sort of horrible things when *The News of the World* closed, you know, as you can imagine it was a very, very sad time and I think for the industry as much as anything were all of the innocent journalists who'd always adhered to codes of conduct who were affected both in their work lives and their home lives, their personal lives, by things that other people had*

done wrong. I certainly didn't experience, hear, or haven't since heard any wrongdoing on the sports desks and, you know, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] closing a newspaper is a pretty extreme way of dealing with such an issue but with the benefit of hindsight I think probably the right thing was done. You know, those people who committed those crimes should never work in the industry again and they have still got a slight, you know, we still get slurs based on that when we've [REDACTED] done nothing wrong.

TB: Yeah. To what extent do you think self-censorship is an issue in sports journalism, and by self-censorship I mean the withholding by a reporter say or a columnist of a fact they know to be true or an opinion which they have but which they decide not to maybe put out there for whatever reason, it may be an adverse reaction from the audience or alienating contacts, that kind of stuff. Does that...

Int9: .... Yeah, I've got to be quite careful on this one because I'm quite outspoken. I think we've got, I think there's a major issue with that – an absolutely major issue. Without naming any names, I think that, umm, if there are columnists, reporters who have more Twitter followers than they do have, than the newspaper sells copies, then there's something wrong. Umm, because there are journalists, there are reporters, who have a very dare I say clever way of manipulating when another paper does a genuine story, umm, for their own means, for their own Twitter followers, for their own personal gain of going on TV and radio and commenting on it, and giving it a very positive twist that goes against what a, what a tabloid newspaper or another newspaper would do. And, you know, as I said earlier on about having a duty of reporting a story that is right and accurate and fair, umm, and some of those are obviously quite controversial, as we talked about the debates before. And some journalists will topspin those and will, will, as you say, withhold information that they do know because they feel like they're going to get a more positive reaction on Twitter or other social media or on the radio if they say "Oh no, I know him he's a lovely lad" and, you know, "I've never heard things like that before". And I wouldn't, I wouldn't accuse them of, you know, of wrongdoing in that, but I think that is an absolute dilemma. I think that there are journalists who don't print stories and I'd like to think, and I'm almost positive, that if any of our reporters at [REDACTED] are in a dilemma about information that they know and that they're not sure whether they should publish or not, that myself and [REDACTED] are aware of those stories and we'll have a continuing conversation with them, probably ongoing over days and weeks on certain ones, about whether we should publish and how we can publish. It's certainly not a how can we not publish conversation, it's a how can we publish and what can we publish conversation. And, yeah, I think that's an incredibly delicate subject around certain reporters, and there are relationships between reporters in mixed zones and press boxes all over the country where I think some reporters have tried to get a story and some reporters aren't.

TB: So you allude there really to the fact that the rise of social media has maybe had an impact on the behaviours of some sports journalists and maybe, therefore, that the rise of social media has posed – is it fair to say – some new ethical issues for sports journalists to think about?

Int9: Yeah, absolutely, yeah, because I think that, you know, if it hasn't been us that's broken a story and you go on, you know, often now the first time I see things is on Twitter or you get an alert or I've unfortunately got every media outlet going that comes as an alert on my phone so I can stay on top of it so it bleeps all the time, but, err, you know if you do get that notification from social media it's only natural that you see the reaction of the public on, on Twitter. But Twitter is such a small cross-section of society and especially for us at [REDACTED], our public, our readers, because I think probably our readership is the least on Twitter of all and we only have to go back to the last General Election and then the referendum to see how wrong Twitter can be. You know, if, if Twitter was correct we'd first of all have a Labour government and we wouldn't be going through Brexit. Umm, because they was wrong on both accounts. And I think it's only natural as a human instinct so say "oh look at the reaction, look at what people are saying" and if you were a reporter with a very large number of followers – hundreds of thousands if not millions of followers – fortunately I'm not in that position, I keep quite quiet on Twitter, and err, but if you are one of those people then your alerts and notifications light up and that is going to influence your decision-making. And it shouldn't. You know, it should.. ok, that can be part of it, but it shouldn't be the driving force and I think that, umm, you know, as I say, this would be a long debate with some reporters who do have a lot of Twitter followers, but I would suggest to them that they are influenced too much by, by those followers and they would often take a stance in a column that they shouldn't do. Because I think that, you know, the instinct should come, first and foremost, should be about their readership and what they and their desks think, and the duty they have as I was saying before.

TB: Yeah, yeah. Another thing too with social media and online obviously, potentially, is whether the quality or indeed quantity of sports journalism is affected, umm, adversely just through the desire for more hits, more audience figures. What's your stance on that in terms of maintaining quality?

Int9: Ok. Clickbait's become a dirty word and, umm, we, yeah, we now we're very fortunate at [REDACTED] that we've had a very sensible redesign of the office, and a sort of restructure of the sports desk. We sit side by side with the digital and the website, you know, I've not worked in any of the other national newspapers' newsrooms for over a decade since doing work experience at others, but – I don't know how they're operating with it – but the, the head of online is sat next to me, umm, when I'm not editing or editing the paper, and so we're making decisions on stories and what are stories and the projection they should get together a lot of the time. And he might say, "This is getting great response on the website" and I think, "Yeah, yeah I'm giving it a back page lead" or, you know, and vice versa. And, you know, hopefully that is having a positive effect on quality but, yeah, you're right, there have been occasions where, umm, you know, you, you get people writing stories just because they've seen something on Twitter or other digital sites, and they're quoting other sources instead of actually doing the proper journalism work of picking up the phone and checking out, either through a source they can get, another reporter, or directly through a club, or an agent themselves. So, umm, yeah, there... I hesitate to say laziness because I don't think it's actually the people working on it that are being lazy, I think it's the demand from digital editors and, you know, the digital consumer as a whole, to produce more stories and more clicks than ever before. Because, you know, the fortunate position of

selling newspapers where once someone has parted with their hard-earned 50p they've got every story in front of them that we've produced, and the problem for websites obviously is people leaving the website and going elsewhere in one click. Umm, so yeah, it's a very, very difficult – and I'm going to use that word 'balance' again – for them in producing high-quality journalism in the best sense of the word and, umm, bringing customers and consumers to a site that essentially has to break even, make a profit and have big enough numbers that we can convince advertisers to sell with us. So, yeah, it definitely has had an impact but I actually think – and I might not maybe be in a minority but I might be in the left side of this – that, that we're actually coming out the other side of that. We've had our bad spell, I think, where, umm, where the quality went right downhill and I think we're actually coming out the other side because now we're actually looking at retention of readers as opposed to just bringing readers in. You know, we're in the millions now of daily, daily users and so the challenge now on the website is to produce features and quality content, umm, and news comment, that keeps readers on the site for longer than a, you know, ten or twelve par story, so I think as [REDACTED] we are coming out the other side of that, but it has been a long process of something we've been working really, really hard on and, you know, there are some, you know, new reporters and younger reporters who are just coming out of university courses and whatever who are hopefully getting a really, really good grounding, schooling in what we should be doing, you know, and not ripping things off Twitter and other publications, but actually going out finding stories and getting stories on the phone ourselves.

TB: Great, and you mentioned about how – right at the start of the conversation – about how you regarded yourself and the rest of your team as sports fans who happen to be in the newsroom.

Int9: Yeah.

TB: In the past there's been a characterisation of sports desks as maybe being the so-called toy departments of news organisations and sports journalists being sort of cheerleaders or fans with typewriters. Where do you sit on that? Do you think it's an unfair characterisation or do you think there needs to be an element of fandom about the way you approach your work?

Int9: Oh, I think there absolutely has to be an element, and on the flipside to that when you started your question there I thought you were actually going to go in the other direction where, you know, we've often been accused of wanting to have a go at sports teams or, you know, absolutely embitters me, I feel bitter about the fact that people think that we would want the England team to fail. You know, I would say absolutely. I love the fact that we're fans. I mean, there were videos doing the rounds on social media of us and other sports departments when England won the penalty shoot-out in the World Cup and, you know, I actually had to bring myself down a peg and get everyone focused on getting the paper out in the next ten minutes because it was like a, you know, stadium in there. You know, and that's part of it. We love it, we love football, we love sport, and that should come across, we should be passionate about what we're doing. Because if we're not passionate about it then how are our pages going to look like they're passionate and what's the reader going to think afterwards? Yeah, the toy and the games department, and the "zoo in the corner" as news

sometimes refer to us – “Oh, sport are rattling their cages” – and whatever else, but you know, we’re as passionate about sport as those news reporters are about delivering news and what they would call more important issues to the nation. But I would say that [REDACTED] reader reads from the back. And so, you know, the first thing [REDACTED] reader does is turn the paper over, and so, you know, we love football and sport and our passion for that should come across. And, as I say, I’ve had numerous, countless, rows with people who say “Ah, you just want to stick the knife in”. No, we don’t want to stick the knife in but we are more than willing to have a go at the national team or any club if they fail. And if they fail because they haven’t put the effort in or they haven’t done what we want and expect them to do, then they’ll get that treatment. But I think if you see the – I’m trying to remember the exact headline – but I think it was [REDACTED] when England went out to Croatia in the semi-final. Our feeling that next day was the feel-good factor that England had brought to the country after years of disappointment, was that we should be proud of those players and so, yeah, I’m almost certain it was [REDACTED]. Because, despite defeat, we were proud, and it’s not very often in the last decade – in the experience that I can speak of – that on the sports desk we’ve been proud of the England national team. And, you know, the last year has been phenomenal and, I’ve got to be honest, I used to take the international week off – I used to try and coincide my holiday with international week – because I didn’t want to work on the desk and I didn’t want to watch football in those weeks. I didn’t take last week off. I loved it, it’s fantastic, writing and talking about the England team, you know, and so, yeah, in response to your question there, I think that it’s important that we’re the fans and that we’re passionate about it, umm, and if they do wrong then we’ll say they do wrong, and if, you know, as has happened in the past – Wayne Rooney or Steven Gerrard have let us down, or whatever, or, you know – we all know that stories about private lives and drinking and whatever else have been done in the papers. Well, if they’re doing all those things and then they fail, then we’re going to talk about them, but if they’re doing all those things after they’ve done well, then let them celebrate, you know. That’s my view on how it should be looked at.

TB: Yeah. Do you think there’s too much time spent on-diary – sports reporters going to press conferences, matches, on that kind of regular rota rather than spending... Do you think enough time is spent off-diary to kind of balance that out.

Int9: Yeah, it’s an interesting one because when I first became a reporter going back nearly 10 years, when I first got my job as a [REDACTED] football correspondent, one of the first things the sports editor said to me was “don’t bother with press conferences”. Umm, and, you know get out there and meet people, get stories. And, you know, as it turned out, I did go to press conferences as well because I needed to get my face seen and, you know, that might have been the only opportunity you got to meet the manager and get him to gain a little bit of trust with you on how you were reporting what he said, and later on hopefully – and I was lucky enough that this was the case with a couple – managers may be able to be contacted personally. So yeah, but the problem that we have now is just, the way that the industry has gone and the unfortunate fact that there are just less journalists working for national papers and for regional papers than there were before, is that we’re asking more of reporters and therefore we can’t send an agency reporter or rely on an agency to go to a press conference while our reporter is elsewhere. You know, cost-cutting measures and everything else mean often we’re having to rely on reporters to do both. But in an ideal

world I would say you're absolutely correct, that there is too much diary, there is too much of that, and we, we make a concerted effort even on press conference stuff to try and get our own take, our own take on things. It was interesting in the paper this morning because I actually thought from the press conference yesterday that most of the back pages would be talking about, erm, Raheem Sterling and his desire to be the best player in the world and Jordan Henderson and Gareth Southgate talking so glowingly about his unbelievable form lately. Erm, and that, us doing a very topical issue for our readers about crowd trouble, you know, we're expecting it to be pretty fiery in Montenegro tonight – no pun intended with all the flairs and everything like that – but I thought that quite a few others wouldn't do it the way we did it and as it turned out all the back pages this morning were pretty similar on the trouble in Montenegro. But my point is that when you have to rely on a press conference, in the newsroom we are trying to make ours look more interesting than any others without affecting the story itself. So, yeah, I'd love to be in a scenario where when I'm putting a list together in the morning I've got a reporter going to the Man United press conference and another Man United reporter trying to get news stories from elsewhere but that unfortunately isn't always the case.

TB: And how has the increasing shift towards digital output affected your sense of what it is to be a sports journalist? Or has it not affected it?

Int9: I don't think it has affected, it hasn't affected me definitely, and I'd like to think it hasn't affected many. Get a good story – the story's king, you know, and if the story's great – whether we present it digitally or in print – not that it doesn't matter but, you know, it, but that's what it's all about: getting stories and getting good stories to our readership and as I said the FMD moment is the golden one for all of us. To get that story that leads the agenda and people are talking about, whether that's a story that we break digitally during the day or something that leads the back page the next morning. It definitely hasn't affected the way I look at stories. The only sort of ongoing debate is, when we do get a good exclusive, and unfortunately in a digital world very, very good genuine exclusives are more difficult to come by, luckily enough we've got a sensational team of reporters who often don't get as much credit as they deserve but we still do get big exclusives, and, umm, our only then debate is are we going to be able to hold on to that until the morning for the back page of the paper or if we do that do we run the risk of someone else getting it later in the day and putting it out digitally? Erm, and so often we go shall we do it as a five o'clock or a seven o'clock digital splash, erm, and therefore obviously what happens then is that the other papers have it the next morning, or do we run that gauntlet and say "Right, that's our back page lead and no-one else is getting it"? Erm, and so we have been winners on that front and losers on that front on a number of occasions in the last few weeks and, you know, it's an ongoing thing we have to have and hopefully our reporters are honest enough that if they think it's going to go out there elsewhere they'll say, "I think we better break this online now".

TB: Yeah, yeah. And just continuing that line of questioning about how you view the trade these days, or the work these days, do you see sports journalism as a profession or as a trade?



Int9: Ohh, that's a difficult question. Umm, I don't know. I, I, I think that it's become more of a profession than a trade, I think that's probably the kindest way to put it. It was, we still use the phrase "In the trade" and dare I say the older members of the desk will say "Oh, back in the days when it was a real trade", umm, but I think there's a definite craft to it, especially as a tabloid, and I don't mean that disparagingly to the broadsheets I just mean, you know, we'll approach a story as I was saying before about back pages and, you know I would like to say that sometimes we craft a back page. I'll see a picture, I mean yesterday before the crowd trouble story happened, for example, there was a picture of the England players throwing a rubber chicken around in training as a warm up, and my immediate reaction was: brilliant. I didn't say this out loud but, brilliant, I've got a picture there and a headline for the back page if there are no stories later on and that is, you know, Declan Rice was there so it was "Chicken and Rice" immediately. And that's something that I think is a bit of a craft and you don't get that instinct from it just being a professional industry, you know, that is for a trade, craft where I've got used to some days where I've got nothing to go on a back page and I've got to be creative and imaginative, and that's where, you know, that hopefully that little bit of edge gets the back page that everybody holds up and says "Crikey, have you seen this?" or "That was funny" or... so one of the favourite back pages I've done was when [REDACTED] tried to get [REDACTED] our reporter to apologise for what he'd written when we knew absolutely that that story was true. And so the next morning we did [REDACTED]. And that's a trade thing, that's a craft thing, that's an "I know what we can do here" and it wasn't to antagonise him, it was to say well why should we apologise when we're reporting on poor results and when [REDACTED] fans want to see improvement and you turning things around not trying to [REDACTED]. So, umm, yeah that's a tough question to answer but, I don't know, hopefully I've given you something.

TB: Yeah. Just the last couple of questions – how firm do you think the distinction is today between sports journalism and sports PR?

Int9: Oh, umm, yeah. An ongoing fight and an ongoing battle. We obviously have daily contact with PRs at both agencies, bookmakers often, from players and from clubs. I'm hoping that there is a clear distinction because I would always say that PRs try to either keep a story out of the paper or only write a positive story, and we're trying to write *the* story. And that to me is the clear definition. You know, I had a very, very heated debate with a, with a Premier League press officer and, you know, he got quite agitated when I called him a PR because he doesn't see himself as a PR, but I see him as a PR. And, err, about how he's actually got to appreciate that the fans of that club would need to know this story. And whether he views it as positively or negatively, to me it was without doubt in the public interest, and I said that unless he gave me any sort of legal ramification of why we couldn't publish, or he could actually prove to me that the story was false – and he couldn't do either – we were going to write the story. So, you know, **we have a duty in that sense to the supporters of that club to write that story and it goes back to the original point about the story is king**. And, you know, as you say, the duty to the reader to tell them something, because if Premier League club PRs and press officers have their way we'd only, we'd only regurgitate the quotes that they put out on the website or the things they say in press conferences, and newspaper sales would be a hell of a lot lower than they already are if that



was the case. So, yeah, there is a pretty, I'd say, a pretty clear definition between the two. And sometimes, when, umm, some reporters have phoned me up to try and give me some quotes or an interview or a story, my response has often been "Are you working for us or are you working for the club?" Umm, and they'll giggle, know exactly what I mean, and then hopefully give me something that's a little more exciting.

TB: Following on from that, last question, what do you think are the essential characteristics that define a sports journalist in today's media environment?

Int9: I think I've probably said all of the things amidst all the other answers. There's got to be a massive passion for sport and the industry as a whole. Ermm, they've got to be a reader, first and foremost, they've got to be a reader because, you know, I always remember that when I first went on my graduate scheme [REDACTED] [REDACTED] virtually threw the papers across the desk at us and we used to do news quizzes every morning, you know, to me if you don't read that paper cover to cover you don't know what you're actually reporting on. And he used to say it was a sackable offence if you hadn't read the paper in the morning. You know, and not only that now I'm in a position where I need to know what's in most of the papers, and so that golden rule of being passionate about the industry, knowing what's going on – because if you don't know what's going on, what's already happened, how do you know when you've got a story? – how do you know what's new and what's interesting? And then having the drive to, when you've got that story, to get it across the line, because that's not always as easy as it might seem. Umm, and then also, you've got to be a decent salesman as a reporter as well because some reporters will phone up and say they've got this story and tell the desk and not really excite the desk very much and then they'll see it down to a single column the next day and it might be on the back page of another paper. And then he might say "Why did mine only get a single column?" and I'll "Well you didn't sound too excited about it and to be honest the way you wrote it, it didn't feel like a back page story. Maybe if you'd written it the other way we'd have got it on the back page". So, yeah, all those key attributes. I mean, it's not, it's not a well-paid industry, it's not an immensely rewarding financially industry compared to others, umm, but, you know, it's incredibly exciting and we get to do different things every day. Hopefully you can see in my answers that I'm still as passionate about it now as I was back then, and those key attributes of hard work, passion, drive, determination that – I know it sounds a bit clichéd – but you can learn most of the other things. You can learn how to write intros, you know, you can learn how to write stories and you can learn how to get stories, but, umm, but all those other things you can't really teach. Hopefully, there's a few more people coming off the rank ready to do that as well.

### **Iota – Initial Distillation**

- The participant emphasises racial portrayal as the main ethical issue facing his title, possibly reflecting the timing of the interview. "There's this nagging thing in the back of our minds about are we either positively or negatively portraying someone, either intentionally or unintentionally, and that is a real tight rope for us at the moment" (p1).
- The question of journalistic duties immediately gives rise to the participant stressing journalists' function of holding the powerful to account. "If we're too soft and we let people get away with things they shouldn't be allowed to get away with then we're not doing our job first and foremost you know, which is, you know... I think there's a broad term of holding

society to account which journalists have to abide by” (p1-2). The participant then offers an unexpected but interesting perspective on his primary duty, which is to himself as a sports fan. This is a yardstick by which the newsworthiness of a story can be assessed. “I absolutely feel that we have a duty to ourselves to begin with as fans, because the first thing I say to anyone who works on our sports desk is ‘We are fans’ and therefore if there’s something at our clubs that is winding us up and riling us then it’s a story, because that is something that fans at those clubs want to read about and want to know about. If it’s something that we don’t care about then I would hazard a guess that it’s something our readers don’t want to know about either. So, yeah, we absolutely have a duty to football, to sport in a broader sense – obviously football being our number one sport” (p2). There are competing duties, which it is hard to order into a hierarchy, but which come to be instinctively applied. “It’s our duty to the clubs, the fans and the game itself, as well as to the paper and to society. It’s a balancing act and I don’t think we ever lay down term a, b and c in any particular order, I think eventually we get to the point where there’s an instinct that ‘No, no we’ve got to print that, we have to print that,’ or ‘No, no that’s crossing the line,’ you know, that’s not going to do anyone any favours either for the paper, the person or sport itself, so, umm, again, yeah, quite a fine balance sometimes” (p2).

- Later on, the participant returns to the importance of sports journalism retaining an element of fandom. “We love it, we love football, we love sport, and that should come across, we should be passionate about what we’re doing. Because if we’re not passionate about it then how are our pages going to look like they’re passionate and what’s the reader going to think afterwards? Yeah, the toy and the games department, and the “zoo in the corner” as news sometimes refer to us – “Oh, sport are rattling their cages” – and whatever else, but you know, we’re as passionate about sport as those news reporters are about delivering news and what they would call more important issues to the nation” (p8).
- The bearing of codes of practice, both industry-wide and internal, are “absolutely huge”, says the participant. There are regular refresher courses and tests for staff. “All of us are pretty well up on legal issues now and historically the mistakes that have been made in the journalism industry, hopefully we won’t be making any mistakes like that again because we’re all so well-versed” (p4). Adherence to codes is seen in existential terms – compliance is needed to ensure the title’s survival. “All those practices have to be really strictly adhered to and otherwise the paper wouldn’t be there very long with the current legal issues and all the IPSO regulations that we have to stick to” (p5).
- The participant says he has not witnessed criminal behaviour, but that he has had to closely monitor reporters’ work for statements which would trigger legal action. He sees himself as “policing” his reporters, whose blunders he attributes to ignorance. “In a way that’s what the desk is for, you know, and I wouldn’t pretend that I have anywhere near the nose for sniffing out a story in the reporters’ environment as some of our top reporters, but my job in there is almost to police that as well, I would say. Yeah, there have definitely been occasions where you read paragraphs and you think, crikey, if that was in the paper we’d be walking into a court room within a week. Umm, but I wouldn’t say, you know, a flagrant sort of, you know, disregard for rules – more ignorance, I think, would be the real offence. But yeah, again, gladly those things are few and far between” (p5).
- Despite having worked for *The News of the World*, he was not aware of criminal behaviour on its sports desk. “I used to do match reports for *The News of the World*. But, no, I didn’t hear, I didn’t come across anything at all. One of the most sort of horrible things when *The News of the World* closed, you know, as you can imagine it was a very, very sad time and I think for the industry as much as anything were all of the innocent journalists who’d always adhered to codes of conduct who were affected both in their work lives and their home lives, their personal lives, by things that other people had done wrong. I certainly didn’t experience, hear, or haven’t since heard any wrongdoing on the sports desks” (p5).

- The participant frames the issue of self-censorship around what he claims is the phenomenon of big-name sports journalists omitting certain stories – or playing them down – for the benefit of their own profiles. “I think there’s a major issue with that (self-censorship) – an absolutely major issue. Without naming any names, I think that, umm, if there are columnists, reporters who have more Twitter followers than they do have, than the newspaper sells copies, then there’s something wrong. Umm, because there are journalists, there are reporters, who have a very dare I say clever way of manipulating when another paper does a genuine story, umm, for their own means, for their own Twitter followers, for their own personal gain of going on TV and radio and commenting on it, and giving it a very positive twist that goes against what a, what a tabloid newspaper or another newspaper would do... Some journalists will topspin those and will, will, as you say, withhold information that they do know because they feel like they’re going to get a more positive reaction on Twitter or other social media or on the radio if they say ‘Oh no, I know him he’s a lovely lad’ and, you know, ‘I’ve never heard things like that before’. And I wouldn’t, I wouldn’t accuse them of, you know, of wrongdoing in that, but I think that is an absolute dilemma” (p6).
- For those with very large social media followings, the participant believes Twitter can skew a sports journalist’s news sense and leave them unduly influenced. “If you were a reporter with a very large number of followers – hundreds of thousands if not millions of followers – fortunately I’m not in that position, I keep quite quiet on Twitter, and err, but if you are one of those people then your alerts and notifications light up and that is going to influence your decision-making. And it shouldn’t. You know, it should.. ok, that can be part of it, but it shouldn’t be the driving force and I think that, umm, you know, as I say, this would be a long debate with some reporters who do have a lot of Twitter followers, but I would suggest to them that they are influenced too much by, by those followers and they would often take a stance in a column that they shouldn’t do” (p7).

## Interviewee 10 - Kappa

### Transcript:

TB: The first question is quite general and, as I say, it's about personal experience so do recall instances from your own experience, but in your experience what do you think are the main ethical issues affecting sports journalists in the course of their work?

Int10: It's such a big question. Pffff.... I don't even know where to start. Erm, can you give me a run in of...

TB: Yeah, sure. One topical thing at the moment, I suppose, is the representation around black footballers, obviously Raheem Sterling's brought that centre stage with some of the stuff he's put out on social media, umm, and I think that's probably prompted a number of desks – sportsdesks – and sports journalists to reflect on, yeah, 'Are we skewing the debate or instilling certain stereotypes or social attitudes by the way we're covering players of different heritage?' It might be ideas around – when we talk about ethics – about the nature of the closeness or distance of the relationships you've got with some of your sources...

Int10: ... Well I kind of have that a lot less now because I'm not a bobby on the beat as it were anymore and because I kind of work for a little bit of, again, for more of a propaganda machine in terms of [REDACTED]. You know, you're working for the [REDACTED] so it's so sanitised now. Erm, anything remotely damaging to the club is taken out and you're just not asked anything. So, I've probably been a little bit out of the loop with stuff like that. Erm, I don't ask awkward questions any more.

TB: How does that make you feel then? You mention about the difference there about being a "bobby on the beat" as it were – boots on the ground doing the reporting – then working for, say, [REDACTED] or... Do you find the transition from the mind-set of the more sort of hard-reporting bobby on the beat versus the sanitised productions, is that a shift of mind-set you find difficult? Or is it just...

Int10: ... It was. I think I'm used to it now, so I filter. And I've got ways of trying to find stuff out by, you know, by asking a roundabout kind of question. But, yeah, I mean to begin with I didn't feel like I was really being a journalist, if I'm honest. When I first started doing it, it sat very uncomfortably with me. It got some people in trouble because they heard, they heard stories because you're in a very privileged environment. Umm, I'll give you an example. I was at the [REDACTED] training ground to interview a player the day after [REDACTED]. No other journalists allowed in [REDACTED], but because I work for the [REDACTED] and they are contractually obliged to provide a player preview interview, I was the only journalist allowed on the training ground. So I saw my colleagues from [REDACTED] all pitched outside, umm, drove in, went to go and wait for my player, I used the toilets in reception because the ones in the press room are disgusting, and said "hello" to the receptionist and as I walked in [REDACTED] walked out, said "morning", walked into a black Range Rover when all the photographs the day before had been of him – that wasn't him – coming out of [REDACTED] training ground in a black Range Rover. Umm, and then I saw [REDACTED] come out who also then said "good morning" and I then

couldn't tell anyone about it. Umm, you know it's not an ethical dilemma there in terms of, you know, 'Sacked manager speaks to owner – leaves the building'. It's not.. if that doesn't get reported the world's not going to end. But at the same time, I'm there as a journalist and I can't tell anyone about it because they'll know exactly where it's come from because I'm the only journalist on the... That kind of stuff jars a little bit with me. I would have liked to at least been able to text somebody and say "That's the actual shot of him, he's actually in this Range Rover that's about to come out now" and I couldn't. So that goes against everything I learnt at university.

TB: Yeah, and that transition then from – or rather the filter as you refer to – the ability to apply that filter is that something that, umm, sort of takes time to apply, or are you now able to kind of move between the two mind-sets of journalist versus more in-house?

Int10: Yeah, I can move between them because some Saturdays I'm working for [REDACTED] covering a [REDACTED] and doing post-match interviews and sometimes I'm working for [REDACTED]. So, umm, for [REDACTED], for example, if there were any pitch invasions, problems, *etcetera* on a match when I've got my [REDACTED] hat on that's not something I would then tweet about, talk about, because I'm there, you know, under their umbrella. For [REDACTED] that's something I can then immediately talk about, umm, highlight – racism, for example, if I heard anything I would have to be really careful, umm, because we're protecting the [REDACTED] brand. I would have to be very careful, umm, what I said and who I said it to because I'm there being paid by the [REDACTED] essentially to work, whereas if I was working for [REDACTED] then I can say what I like.

TB: Yeah, so it's a dual identity in a way. Do you view it like that or is that incorrect?

Int10: Umm, I wouldn't say it's a dual identity, it's a different – it's a responsibility that comes from... It's almost like in-house PR. I don't want to use the 'propaganda' word because, you know, there are lots of things brilliant about [REDACTED] and what they do, but when you work for [REDACTED] it's like working for a club channel. So there'll be plenty of, you know, *if you work for Crystal Palace, for example, you're not going to put out a negative story about Crystal Palace. Same thing – the [REDACTED] is a global brand. If you're working for the [REDACTED] there are some things you can talk about,* ummm, so – how much am I allowed to say about this? – err, so [REDACTED] at the moment are going through a transition and they're cutting news. They are taking news out of the programming schedule because they see negative connotations surrounding it, because the clubs associate news with negativity. So the branding of the news programme that currently goes out globally as [REDACTED], is changing because clubs see it as, umm, they see news as negative. So it's becoming more "We're here for a press conference", "We're here for a, you know". Umm, yeah, *there have been a few instances where we've been told not to focus on a particular negative incident, umm, and we have different news lines to [REDACTED], for example. When we're in a press conference we stick to game stuff. It's, that's probably the best word for it, sanitised.*

TB: You mentioned about how you've got that responsibility as it were when you are wearing that hat – [REDACTED] – you've got that responsibility towards [REDACTED]

██████. Umm, do you think, using that concept of responsibility, do you think sports journalists have duties during the course of their work and if so to whom do they owe those duties in the course of their work? Is it to their audience – to the readers – is it to the people they're covering, you know, is it to their colleagues?

Int10: Depends on the agenda. I think they have a responsibility to journalism as a concept, umm. I think... it's really difficult, because it depends what you think people should know. And who's to be the judge of that? Who judges what Joe Public should know? Well, they should be able to know everything, but then equally if you work in a bank do you tell everybody everything that goes on in the bank? Not necessarily. Sometimes you have to pick your battles, I would say. However, I'm probably the wrong person, you know, I'm certainly not a Daniel Taylor-type journalist. He is fantastic. I don't have the opportunity to go out and do that with the work that I do. So my journalism is a very different type of journalism. I would say it is more reporting what's going on factually, but I don't get to use enough of my investigative journalism anymore, really.

TB: I see. So, the duties there, the responsibilities, just vary on the role you're in?

Int10: Yeah. Absolutely. If something happened while I'm at a football ground, you know – I'm now going to West Brom at the weekend, I don't know who West Brom are playing, I've literally just been given that game – I'm going to West Brom at the weekend, if there was a news story to emerge at West Brom I would report that as, with my journalist hat on. Umm, yeah, it's really difficult, there's a big part of me that doesn't feel as much as a journalist now as I used to be, perhaps. Umm, and I would say journalism itself is massively changing. That's why I said to the students earlier on about making sure that they always report the facts and get them accurate because I think there is a lot of noise out there at the moment. And the thing that worries me the most – one person can tweet something out, 20 people can retweet it, and all of a sudden it's fact, when it's not. And that is a responsibility that the kids coming into the industry nowadays don't have. You know, again, it becomes a narcissistic endeavour of – I want to get noticed, so I'm going to say this and see who picks up on it. Well, who's then going to find out whether that's true or not? Umm, you could be doing that for forever and a day. And there's nobody on the internet holding anybody to account on these kind of things. Erm, so, from my point of view as a, you know, jobbing, jobbing journo if you like – and that's the other thing is that I don't go to the same grounds every single week so you can't develop a story because you're somewhere else. You can't build those relationships as easily and get stuff out there. Erm, I think you've got to be available and approachable for somebody to, if they want to get a story out there and you have a means of getting it out there for them, you have to weigh up what their, umm, what agenda they have to get that out there and what their, their, and whether or not that viewpoint is skewed in any way or comes from a completely personal point of view, and what getting that out there might mean for x, y, z. Because that's the other thing, you know, it's all very well making these contacts like the guys were saying earlier but agents in particular use those contacts if you think of the, you know, erm, Jim Whites of this world for example who have agents getting in touch with them saying "x, y, z is moving to x, y, z". Well, is there any truth in that whatsoever or are they just trying to get a new contract with bigger money? Where's the truth in that? But we're still reporting it. Even though, because everyone wants to have a news line to talk about and have something new to talk about,

even though the source of that might be lying out of their teeth to actually, like, people are manipulating journalists more than ever because journalists, nowadays, have to be going to their editors or their, you know, radio, heads of radio, whatever, whoever their working for whatever medium, they have to be going there with a new story or, you know, and so they're... You end up reporting absolutely everything whereas I think a few years ago you didn't, you didn't report that. It had to be a big story to report it. Now, it can be the tiniest little thing ever – it's gotta, if there's a place for a nib [news in brief] in this 24-hour environment of news then anything goes.

TB: And anything goes even if the journalist knows they are maybe being played a little bit?

Int10: Unfortunately, because again it goes back to that issue of ego. And everybody, you know, journalists have now become personalities where they perhaps weren't in the past necessarily. Umm, and when you're a personality, umm, you have to, you have to put yourself out there a little bit, and perception is huge. And if you are perceived to know everybody and know all the little things that are going on, that's only going to be good for your own profile.

TB: Is that growth of, as you say, sort of journalists'/sports journalists' personality, is that closely associated with the rise of social media, do you think?

Int10: I think so, umm. Yeah. Everybody's trying to jostle for position and be the go-to person/station/paper/website. Umm, and with that comes noise and, yeah, with that comes fake news, slightly exaggerated news. I mean, the breaking news ticker is a perfect example of that. Who says that that's a massive piece of news? This big yellow strap says that this is a massive piece of news, but maybe ten years ago you wouldn't even have batted an eyelid if you'd seen that. And when there are people, you know, people are clever. You've seen with the change in social media that people are now, you know, companies are now using it, companies have always been very clever about getting their branded message out in some way, but they're getting more and more clever about how they do it and how they create a news story, because they know that people need to fill content. People need content to fill spaces in their platform, and I think that is, that has become a big thing, and when you've got younger, you know, keen, umm, APs/junior editors *etcetera* working wanting to get a break, they're more likely to see something and not see the, err, see that a brand is trying to get their message out within it and put it out there. Does that make sense?

TB: Yes...

Int10: ... Inarticulately saying it while trying to be diplomatic, which is not an easy balancing act.

TB: So the suggestion there maybe is that it requires a certain amount of experience to be able to maybe see a story for what it is and some of the truth behind it, or the element of truth within it...

Int10: ... Yeah...

TB: So linked to that idea of maybe a sports journalist becoming more wise and more experienced, where is it that you think sports journalists gain their professional values from? Is it just from being in the newsroom...

Int10: ... Other, well, being in that newsroom, but also having somebody to look up to and seeing the way they do it and I think sometimes, you know, [REDACTED] touched on mentorships [REDACTED] – that's really important, because if we don't filter down what we were taught years ago, umm, about fact-checking, umm, how one piece of... [REDACTED] argue about semantics all the time but in journalism in particular it's key. How somebody reads something depending on how you've, you know, no matter what your message was behind it, if somebody's reading it negatively one change of a word changes the whole context of the piece. Umm, and it's making sure that these youngsters don't go into it having an agenda and if you're wanting to make a mark for yourself and show people what you can do, there's your agenda. Something that maybe is a very basic story, you sex it up a little bit to get it out, to get the by-line, to get it on air, because... and that's a different agenda. Umm, and I think that happens more and more because there are more and more [REDACTED] journalists out there jostling for position and trying to... You see it on the internet now, you see a few people kind of calling it out but there are some journalists coming through who maybe are making bold statements and bold, umm, accusations to get a following and to get a name, erm, and then that's problematic.

TB: Over-selling?

Int10: Over-selling, yeah.

TB: Related to that, what impact did you think, in your own experience and looking more generally now at the industry, what impact do you think codes of conduct or regulatory codes have over – what impact does that have on a sports journalist's conduct?

Int10: Um, Ofcom [*pause in interview as interviewee's phone goes off*] ... So Ofcom can massively hold radio and television to account, umm, which is superb, but I think from a broadcasting perspective that is then very frustrating when there are lots of things that television and radio companies cannot do or cannot say, but the internet seems to be able to do exactly what they want. And people on video, which is broadcasting, are able to do that on a bigger platform than perhaps what radio and television reach, umm, so why, why – they're not held to account is something that is something massively overdue being addressed, I would say.

TB: Does that point towards the need for there, in the digital age now, for the need to be an over-arching code that encompasses all media rather than it being, you know, separate codes of practice for...

Int10: ... Yeah, I would say so, particularly because print media now do their own stuff online, they do their own videos, so, yeah, we're all under the same umbrella. It's multimedia. Umm, so, yeah, I would say we all have to be held to account, you know, it used to be that papers, you know, pictures associated with, umm, word, you know, were separate. Well now you're having exactly the same – you can use a picture online, you can



use a picture on the television, you can direct people on the radio to see a picture with words and talk about it. It's all the same. It's all the same. It has to be under the same umbrella.

TB: Do you think codes then are essential? Or are they irrelevant? Are they... what prominence do you give to them in the course of your professional life?

Int10: Personally, I think they're vital. There are other people, you know, who would disagree, you know, and say the internet has to be free. I don't think the internet has to be free. The press have to be free in one point of view, but you also have to be held to account or otherwise you are gonna get people who are not trained journalists who have their own agendas, or somebody else's agenda, that are then gonna be, you know, to quote Donald Trump, purporting fake news. You have to stop that. You know, I 100 per cent believe in freedom of the press but there has to be a code of ethics that everybody abides by otherwise it is open for abuse.

TB: So it's almost, correct me if I'm wrong, it's almost like you're suggesting that that applying a code to yourself as a professional, the code almost distinguishes you from non-professionals?

Int10: Well, yeah, I suppose so because I've been trained whereas, you know, I could... Joe Bloggs next to me hasn't been trained and doesn't actually know the implication of getting stuff wrong, or misreporting facts. Err, but I would also say everybody's moral code is different, and so what I would feel very uncomfortable doing or saying or reporting somebody else might have absolutely no qualms whatsoever in doing. Umm, and so if there is a code of conduct for everybody to abide by regardless of where you sit morally on something then I would say that's very important.

TB: Umm, you touched on this earlier a little but in terms of maybe people over-selling stories or there being that temptation in order to develop your sports journalism personality, but what do you think, what's been the impact of maybe the pressure to achieve high audience figures – particularly the pressure arising from the digital age where there's this battle for unique visitor numbers and eyeballs on pages?

Int10: Yeah, well, I mean that's that's numbers people, that's money people, who work under a completely different code, umm, and that is a problem. I'm not intelligent enough to be able to even come up with a solution for that I'm afraid, I wish I was. I'm quite a simple journalist in the nicest sense of the word, umm, but there are lots of people who want to exploit the media in every single way they possibly can, umm, and when there's money involved and big business involved, then.. yeah, there's a lot open to interpretation I suppose is the best way of putting it.

TB: In your experience what do you think the rise of social media – what sort of impact does the rise of social media have maybe on some of the editorial and ethical calls that sports journalists have to make? Actually, you mentioned earlier about the, you know, we discussed using social media as a means of getting yourself out there...

Int10: ... Yeah...

TB: ... and we discussed about how maybe, you know, in that effort to get, to be seen as the ego, or because of ego the need to be seen to have your finger on the pulse maybe you'd, you know, sometimes overstate things. Is that the main issue do you think with social media, or are there other ethical issues is poses?

Int10: It's so difficult. When you back to, like, the old days if you like, your source of information was boots on the ground, as we've said before – reporters out and about, talking to genuine people face-to-face – PA [Press Association]. I remember when AFP [Agence France Presse], you didn't trust AFP. Umm, that's what we were always told [redacted], you know, you trust PA, don't trust AFP – check every source with that. You kind of mostly, you know, umm, trust Reuters, for example. But when something flashed up from the AFP news agency you immediately questioned it. And **now newsrooms have Twitter, and they're the sources. They're not verifiable** and this whole thing about verifiable accounts – if you've got a BBC or any kind of organisational, umm, email address, you can have a verified account, so that doesn't make any difference anymore. Umm, but people are now using that as sources. Well the only way you can, you can't just stick out a tweet that Jack Rogers has posted because how do you know that Jack Rogers is not actually David Davis or whoever? **You know, without having their number, ringing them, going and meeting them – well, who's got time to do that? People don't. And it's a fast-paced medium [clicks fingers on last three words of sentence].** And you're getting stuff out there, and then you've got inexperienced journalists seeing something and immediately thinking it's fact, retweeting, sending it out, giving it... so TV and radio in particular, because that's where my expertise is, have a responsibility to only read out/show, you know, things that have been verified but how do you go and do that, and when there's a load of speculation going on on **Twitter and the news story is happening on the social media platform and you're way behind**, and you're sitting there as a news editor going "Well, everybody's, everybody online saying this, why are we saying this?" You know, there's a really fine balance. BBC had to change quite a lot when Sky were doing a lot of their, you know, err, 24-hour news, you know, BBC then started doing a 24-hour news channel and they were a little bit more careful, then they started going a bit rogue, then a few things went wrong, you know, because you're playing catch-up. Well it used to be that the news knew what was going on first and now it feels like the news, in inverted commas, the traditional broadcast media, is playing catch up with social media. Well you can't police that. There's nobody sitting there going – I mean, you want a diverse range of views, you want people's opinions, but you don't know what their agenda is so, you know, how do you, apart from picking them all out to balance and getting someone to judge it themselves – Brexit's a prime example, I know it's going off the subject. Does anybody actually know what's going on with Brexit anymore? There's so much noise around it that you don't know anymore, you don't know if you trust the BBC who seem to want to Remain, umm, and then throw in the, you know, when they pick the people who are Brexiteers they tend to be a certain type of person. Well I know there are lots of Brexiteers who are highly educated intelligent people, but the BBC only tend to put Brexiteers on who sound like White Van Man who is racist. Well, that is exactly the same kind of thing, I know it's going away from sport, umm, but, you know, that's a responsibility that if, some of these, you know, people won't necessarily even know that they've got an agenda with it, it's sub-conscious, because that's what they think so they

immediately go for what they presume is, you know, a Remainder and a Brexiteer, and actually probably most of the time they'll be completely the opposite of what the perception is of them, it's just that the media have painted them as 'All Remainders live in London and are well-educated and slightly hippified' but far more intelligent than anyone who wants, wants to leave. Umm, and I don't think that's the case at all. There's no balance whatsoever, and I know sport is very different with things like that, umm, but they're the same kind of challenges.

TB: In your experience have you ever encountered behaviour from sports journalists that you've thought is way beyond the pale ethically or which has been actually illegal?

Int10: No, no. Umm... but again I don't get involved in the heavy stuff, so I wouldn't really be, umm, and most, most journalists I encounter are very fair and wouldn't put a story out without having done their research. The younger kids I don't know so well, umm, I don't know... I don't really trust anybody anymore, I think that's the...

TB: ...Why's that? Is that because you, is that because of the wider state of the media? You mentioned "noise" quite a lot... It's sometimes difficult...

Int10: ...Yeah, overwhelm...

TB: ...to separate the 'signal' from the 'noise', is how it's been put – you know, the truth from the speculation...

Int10: ...Yeah...

TB: ...Is that maybe why you're a bit more sceptical about...

Int10: ...Yeah, I think, I feel like stuff gets twisted nowadays, like, for example, going back to what I said on stage earlier on [interviewee had earlier spoken to guests at a university festival], take that out of context, if somebody tweeted that out, for example, a load of people would then comment on it online, it would be retweeted, it would be twisted, it's like Chinese whispers. And then all of a sudden, before you've even had a right to reply, people have got a perception of you and your, umm, opinions on life in general. It's like, and that is what footballers must feel like. Like Raheem Sterling, who you mentioned at the beginning. He's had this, this horrendous painting of who he is that – sometimes he's maybe not helped himself with some of it – but at the same time people have just jumped on a bandwagon and people nowadays, particularly with social media, are sheep. They tend to believe what's put out in front of them. Umm, and everybody wants to be an expert, everybody wants to sound like they know what they're talking about, and so if Dave down the pub has said to Janine in the pub, "Bloody hell, did you see that thing in the Mail with Raheem Sterling? Oh my God, what a Billy big bollocks." Janine might not have seen it, but Janine goes, yeah, Raheem Sterling's a Billy big bollocks, and then has gone on to somebody else and said, you know, and it, it's perpetuated and is now fact that Raheem Sterling is a Billy big bollocks... And I do podcasts, we talk about it, I remember my first [redacted] podcast, and Raheem Sterling was getting pelters, err, for having missed a load of chances but it was literally because one journalist had said something in a game

about “Oh, Sterling just misses so many chances.” Well, then you’ve got a load of pundits who are like, oh God I didn’t watch that game so I need to get all my facts... Oh right, Raheem Sterling missed a load of chances.” They won’t have even watched the game. Just repeating it. Someone said it – repeat, repeat, repeat, repeat, repeat, fact. That’s the problem.

TB: You mentioned the podcast there, I mean this next question may be connected with that. To what extent do you think self-censorship takes place by sports journalists. I mean, do you self-censor...

Int10: ... [laughs] I’ve just been doing it for the last half-an-hour, haven’t I? [laughs]

TB: I hope not [laughter from both interviewer and interviewee]. But that, that sense of, you know, you’re on a podcast or maybe you’re, you know, news reporting and you’re aware of certain facts but are there occasions where you maybe opt not to put those in the public domain? Maybe there are honestly-held opinions that you have about a particular player or an agent or what have you but...

Int10: ...Yeah...

TB: ... for whatever reason, again, you don’t give voice to that opinion for whatever reason.

Int10: My main reasoning would be for something like that is that... So, for example, there are certain managers I maybe don’t really enjoy interviewing. That’s really unprofessional of me to say that, maybe I caught them on a bad day, doesn’t... And if I say, “I don’t like interviewing them” someone could twist that to ██████████, for example, or “He’s not a very nice man”. No – I just don’t like interviewing them. So, I’m, I’m probably over-cautious. I probably overly self-censor because stuff gets twisted all the time and so I’m really conscious, I mean I’m quite, I’m really careful what I put on Twitter. I’m actually nervous – I’ve been doing stuff back on ██████████ again – I’m actually nervous about it. I can’t enjoy – I don’t enjoy myself broadcasting as much as I used to because everybody just wants to pick up on one negative thing that you’ve said or twist something you’ve said and, as I say, that then becomes fact, even when it’s taken out of context, and because you don’t have a right of reply and because I don’t spend my life on social media, umm, there’s then a worry that people have got a perception of you or your opinion or that you slagged someone – you know, say for example I mentioned a manager’s name, umm, and said ‘Yeah, I don’t really enjoy interviewing him particularly’ .. So, I’ll give you, I’ll give an example. Umm, I was at a university talk about six months and off the cuff was asked “Which manager do you least enjoy interviewing?” And it was a quick-fire round and I said “Probably Ian Holloway”. Now I could end up working with Ian Holloway, I mean I highly doubt he’ll ever hear that, but I could end up working with Ian Holloway and he’s sitting there going “██████████, well I’m not going to give ██████████ interview”. Or, you know, “You’ve made me look out to be a right arsehole. Why?” My main reason for not liking interviewing Ian Holloway is because he rambles on forever, which means I’m more likely to miss my train, and he comes out late, and he can be quite aggressive. But I’ve had lovely chats with Ian Holloway in the past. But that could be totally taken out of context, I could then be in a radio studio with Ian Holloway and someone’s like

and then he just, that... I hate that but that is the world we live in at the minute and if I'm really honest, if I didn't do this job I would not be on social media. I've got no interest in it whatsoever. I find it vile.

TB: But you feel a, it's almost an occupational necessity?

Int10: Absolutely. Yeah, I feel like I would not be relevant if I wasn't on it. And I feel like my – I'm going to sound like one of these, and this is what I hate – I feel like my profile wouldn't be high if I wasn't on it. And I feel nowadays that people are given jobs based on profile – think influencer. Are they journalists half the time? No, they're being asked to comment on things that they maybe don't necessarily have any kind of code that they operate on, and they're certainly not journalists, and, you know... but that's the way things are going. So I think, I actually scarily think that the term 'journalist' will be obsolete eventually.

TB: Ok, well that takes us very much into the latter section of the interview really which is about the, sort of, idea of professional identity. You say that you think the term will be obsolete. Is that because you think the distinction between journalist and audience/public is...

Int10: ...Everybody's a journalist now, everyone's an expert. Umm, what is the difference in today's world between your opinion on a story and Mike down the road's opinion on the story? If you've not, if you're not the source of the story but you are brought on air to talk about it as a journalist, what's the difference between you being brought on air to talk about it as a journalist and Mike down the road being brought on air to talk about it, when you've read the same piece? You're, both of your opinions are valid. Do you see what I mean? Am I explaining myself?

TB: Yep.

Int10: Yeah.

TB: Yep, but what about the need though, it's something for the news to be broken as it were...

Int10: ... Yeah...

TB: ... for stories to be unearthed, published or broadcast, umm, before we get the opinion, the reaction, the punditry reaction to it, so in an era where there is all this noise isn't it arguably – this is just coming at it from the other angle – isn't it more important in a way that we do have those journalists who, who can be regarded as trusted sources, people who do do their fact-checking, people with a proven track record of delivering accurate content? Isn't that more important and therefore does not the term 'journalist' have enduring relevance and even more importance?

Int10: Yeah, I think so, but I also think that the public don't trust journalists anymore. And so you're in exactly the same kind of realm of who do you, you know, how do you know... I think we live in, in an era where people don't trust people in authority. And journalists are

people in authority, and so journalists are holding the big people in authority to account, but journalists themselves are not trusted. Umm, and so, I mean, even me as a journalist working within the media I read, listen and watch everything with a degree of cynicism. And if I do that when I work in the industry what's somebody outside of the industry looking at it like?

TB: On that topic, sometimes within the media industry, sometimes within journalism, sports journalism – the sports journalism department – has been viewed as the toy department, you know, fans with typewriters...

Int10: ... Yeah, yeah...

TB: ... Do you think those descriptions, those tags, have any enduring relevance, contain any truth?

Int10: No. **Umm, journalism is about passion, umm, it's about truth... Totally depends on what, I mean, I think journalism has become more opinion-based than ever before. Even when you are a local journalist reporting on your local team... I don't know how, I don't know how to articulate this at all. God, I don't why I'm even working in this fucking industry. Say that out loud! [Laughs] It does make you feel like that sometimes.**

**TB: Well, umm, it's not, the purpose of this isn't for it necessarily to be a counselling session about sports journalism!**

**Int10: Feels like it, feels like it.**

TB: But some people, you know, actually have said afterwards 'That was really interesting, it got me thinking about stuff in a different way...

Int10: ... Yeah...

TB: ... It's quite on the couch; it's not meant to be like that but it is meant to be about you thinking about your experiences I suppose, so in that sense there is maybe a strand of...

Int10: Yeah, I've always felt like sport is seen as the inferior partner to news, always. But I still feel there's a lot of important... I'll tell you what always used to annoy me, actually, is when, umm, I worked on the sports desk at [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] would take over the big sports story. That used to really annoy me, because why wouldn't they just trust the sports team to do it? 'Cos we'd know it inside out and they'd take over and get it wrong, or... But then other people might view it – news journos might view it – as "Well we're looking at it from a different angle from people who aren't sports fans, so perhaps we're looking at it more objectively" – which I also understand. Umm, there is an element of being involved in sport and being a sports journalist where you are so involved in it and so, that you perhaps don't take a step away, umm, and think about... there's a lot of assumed knowledge, with a lot of things, umm, but particularly some of the hard-hitting stuff that's come out recently. I mean., when you listen to what [REDACTED] Hillsborough, that, that's the fear I perhaps have now. If an incident like that happened

now, there's a, there's a brilliant side to social media that would expose people, events, things straight away – that you would then have to collate and fact-check – but it would be out in the domain already. This is the danger. So if – I don't really want to use Hillsborough as an example, but – if you were going to use that as an example and everybody was then tweeting out what was happening – live tweeting, *etcetera* – then everybody then has an opinion on it straight away, so you're never, ever gonna have a trial... you're never going to be able to find a jury that's not seen that, heard it, been influenced by it in any way, shape or form, today. So how do you then hold people to account? Umm, again... I'm so sorry, I had about five hours' sleep last night so I'm just not really articulating myself very well. Umm, partly because I'm also trying to not be too...

TB: Yeah, they're sensitive examples aren't they? You know, when you're thinking about, sort of, Hillsborough as well obviously it's such an almost – it's come to represent, it's almost transcended sports news and become part of the national psyche really.

Int10: Yeah.

TB: But what about the, you mentioned it there about [REDACTED] story because obviously the implication being that news can give it the proper, objective treatment...

Int10: ... Yeah, the proper treatment...

TB: ... On sports desks at the moment, what do you think the balance is like between, umm, harder, investigative pieces – hard news – and the more, sort of, steady diet of press conference coverage, match coverage?

Int10: Well [REDACTED] are still doing some good stuff. They have an investigations desk now, umm, which is brilliant. Umm, I'm probably the wrong person to ask, that's the problem. I'm just not, I'm just, I'm not enough in a newsroom anymore. In fact, I probably go into newsrooms once a month now and I don't break stories. And in fact, in fact, [REDACTED] said to me, not that long [ago], "I want you to break me a story". Umm, I don't know, I don't feel like I'm a traditional journalist anymore, perhaps.

TB: Which takes us back to where we were at the start really about just how roles evolve maybe to reflect wider trends in the media market and, umm. As you say, you're freelance and you're kind of fulfilling various roles – podcasting one day, [REDACTED] coverage the other and then [REDACTED] coverage. How do you view your professional activities there? Do you see it very much as a kind of profession that you have, or is it more of a trade, or a craft that you fulfil?

Int10: Umm, I've never really thought about it. I, I love having a varied job. I love being at games as much as I love being in the studio, as much as I love doing stuff that isn't sport-related to balance out my life a little bit. I think sport used to be all-consuming in my life – work, home and everything – and now I have to have a bit more of a balance. Umm, but I have the same journalist values wherever I work, umm, and I don't have an agenda and I think that's why I can be a freelancer, because I don't have an agenda. Umm. I would

probably say I'm quite a simple person. I get sent to a game, I want to report on the game. I'm not really a hardened breaking news journalist, I would say.

TB: How do you find it when you've maybe done a day or two for the [REDACTED] if you're then covering a game the day after? That sort of switch to a slightly different angle – you look at the experience that the game you're covering. Is that – I suppose that's part of the portfolio career, the freelance mentality? It becomes, is this fair to say, it becomes a sort of something you don't need to think about too much...

Int10: I don't think about it, I really don't. I literally take each day. I mean, as you've seen, my phone has not stopped ringing, I've had like messages, this is all for stuff I'm doing in like three or four days' time. I can't get my head around stuff quick enough. And like one of your students mentioned the Liverpool stuff, I'd vaguely seen a mock up video of that but hadn't spoken to Kelly about it, hadn't like properly looked at social media about it because there's just so much, so much information. And **I would say my biggest problem being a freelancer is that I suffer from massive overwhelm. There is so much – I cannot just focus on one thing, umm, and give it 100 per cent attention, which means I can't be an expert on anything.** Umm, because I need to know about the Premier League, the Championship, League One, League Two, outside stuff, new stuff going on within sport, I cannot... whereas somebody might be sat at a desk and their one task this week is to uncover x, y, z, or, umm, do an in-depth interview with one manager and plan, you know, to get certain things out of him. I literally have a few hours before I'm doing an interview to think what do I want to get out of this, what do we need, where is this going, who is my audience for this, therefore what questions am I going to ask? What game am I doing, what's the story of this game? I literally just switch [clicks fingers] each one.

TB: And is that what makes the job exciting for you and keeps you engaged? Or is it at times that's what's particularly demanding about it?

Int10: I think it's a bit of both. But I think I'd be bored if it wasn't like that. I like challenging myself, I like pushing myself. However, I am a bit of a perfectionist and so I would – if I got paid the same amount of money to do less work and do it to a better standard that would be great, but that's not how it works as a freelancer unfortunately. But, yeah, I'd love more time in my day to be able to do stuff as absolutely bang on as I could. So, I don't know how helpful any of this is.

TB: Hugely helpful. Very much so. Just a last couple of questions if that's ok. How firm do you think the distinction is today between sports journalism and sports PR?

Int10: I think they're much closer related nowadays than they ever were before. Umm, you know, I gave the example of [REDACTED] but also clubs – club TV is sports PR. Players now have their own PR, so when you're interviewing them they've got a message to give in whatever way. Umm, if you're running that interview on, you know, as a whole they can get it in. Yeah, it's – Instagram is just all PR. Umm, and so if you're as a journalist, particularly TV stuff, if you're given footage – you can have an exclusive interview with Raheem Sterling if you mention this or if he can run this or whatever. People need content and so the sports PR companies massively take advantage of that because they



know that everybody needs content and content is king, to quote a cliché. Umm, they can do it themselves. It used to be that you'd sit on the newsdesk and you'd mainly be looking to try and prevent any branding and not have a player with a Nike cap on. Umm, golfers had to have something like blocked out. PR companies have got smart, they think of other ways to do it, either in messaging or via influencers, you know, and now a player is their own PR machine. They don't even, you know, necessarily need a brand behind them, they're their own brand so it's, it's ingratiated within sports journalism I think. I don't think there's... I don't think there's able to be enough distinction and kids can't distinguish it, I don't think.

TB: And does that add to the sense of noise that you've referred to a few times?

Int10: **It's really noisy. I don't know if that's just me getting old. I feel like I am getting old and I, I mean, and I think also as a freelancer it's really difficult because you are, it is busy, it's always busy. Umm, and then because you're supposed to be on top of everything that probably adds to the overwhelm, I would say. But I mean if I can't filter through the stuff as a reasonably intelligent person who's been a journalist for 15, 20 years, if I go through, you know, I have... I'm probably quite guilty of this and I'd say a lot of people are, we're all quite guilty of getting snapshots of an event and snapshots of a story [clicks fingers] just to fill ourselves in on what's going on, as opposed to reading the in-depth pieces and getting a lot of context behind it and finding out more.** You know, I'll read as much as I can, umm, but there's only so much time in the day and so there are actually things that you'll probably miss and you'll only pick up the headlines, and headlines – as you know – quite often have nothing to do with the actual story itself. They're just clickbait. Umm, and I would say it's really difficult when you want to appear to know everything, and you want to be talking in the pub as an expert, not to just be sucked in by those headline if you're a, if you're a consumer, and when as a journalist you can be guilty of doing that yourself it's only ever going to infiltrate everything you do. So, yeah.

TB: Finally, what do you think, then, given all the things we've looked at, what do you think are the essential characteristics now that define a sports journalist in today's media environment?

Int10: Err, passion. You have to be passionate. Inquisitive, still. **I still think there are outstanding journalists out there who are determined to get the truth no matter what and I'm so pleased they're still there. I would say from my personal point of view I've probably along the way lost that a little bit, erm, I just don't have enough time, I would say. But there are still people out there doing really good work. I'm trying not to be too negative about an industry I really love.**

TB: I was going to say, are you sad that you're not, maybe you're not able to do that sort of...

Int10: ... a little bit. I think it's my own choice...

TB: ... Yeah...

Int10: I think if, probably if I'm going to hold my hands up, a lot of what I do now is more money-orientated because I've got a mortgage and a life and I think I've decided that there is – there are – power people who are always going to be power people, and I'm not, I don't know whether I have enough fight in me to fight the power people, I think. I want a quiet life.

TB: And how does that fit with the essential characteristics?

Int10: It doesn't at all. And that's a problem, I would say. I think that's a problem. But I also think that that perhaps what will come out more and more is that a lot of people will be exhausted by it all, and that it's more and more competitive – you've got to be, you've literally got to work 24 hours a day, it feels, in order to be relevant, in order to be important, in order to be on top of everything, and, you know, I work 18 hours a day some days. Working 24 hours a day does not appeal to me and I think the older I've got the more I've just distinguished having a bit of a life as well is just as important. Umm, and I think a lot of really, really, really good journalists doing really, really, really good things that's their kind of reason to live as opposed to I've got other things in my life that I enjoy and want to do. And I don't, I think perhaps that makes me not necessarily, umm, a journalist with a future maybe.

TB: It's just the way you've made decisions about where you see the important things in your life and obviously work's part of it but there's a bigger picture?

Int10: Yeah, I would say so. I think I love my job, but my job doesn't define me and I think that's the realisation I've come to, is that for ages I thought my job defined me and it doesn't. I'm actually quite at peace with that and happy with it but it probably makes me a little too reflective for a piece like this. I'm probably, I find the fascination – I have more of a fascination with the psychology of sporting personalities and their reason for doing what they do and their purpose and confidence issues – I find all of that much more fascinating. That's the kind of journalism I like – finding out about the person, erm, than uncovering stories and truth, if you like. I like, what I've always loved about the job is the people, so I don't know if that makes sense. I don't know if I'm helping you in the slightest, Tom, I really don't.

TB: It's not about helping, it's just about answering the questions and it being part of the research.

Int10: Yeah, I mean, I don't know what... I find it really, erm... It's changed loads from when I've worked. I feel like there's a load of old stuffy old men working in this industry who are still banging on about the good old days of journalism and they're still acting as though they work on papers, and I just don't think that's the way the industry is going. And it's certainly something that I've stepped away from and am not, you know... It's exhausting. Really exhausting, actually.

TB: Working in an environment where you feel that those at the top as it were – you mentioned "power people" – that maybe they're marching to an outdated rhythm?

Int10: Some of them are, yeah. Definitely, definitely. Erm, and I think they're struggling to stay relevant, umm, and nobody... **I don't feel like there's any other time in my career where I've felt like things are changing so rapidly. It feels like you're – I mentioned it earlier – playing catch-up as opposed to actually being at the forefront of it. I feel like journalism is playing catch-up, massively.**

TB: To what's going on elsewhere – social media? The public's driving things maybe?

Int10: Yeah. Again I go back to the perception thing. I don't think the public trusts journalists anymore. They don't trust anybody in authority, I don't think, and journalists are an authority. Umm, and, yeah, I don't know. I don't know, I don't think I'm intelligent enough to articulate it properly, umm...

TB: Well, you've given an articulate description of your feelings about things so, by definition...

Int10: ... **I feel quite depressed [laughs]. No, I'm joking, I'm joking.**

TB: Well that's fantastic. We'll end it there.

### **Kappa – Initial Distillation:**

- Most striking about this interview is my sense, as a philosopher rather than a psychologist, at how the interviewee is suffering from a state of burnout, in which stress at their current workload, uncertainty at their professional identity, and anxiety over the future direction of sports journalism all combine. This emerges steadily as the interview goes on, culminating in some frustrated verbal outbursts and then more resigned, almost morose, statements. Their final remark – “I feel quite depressed [laughs]. No, I'm joking, I'm joking” (p16) – while qualified, does, I believe, hint at an underlying dissatisfaction and disaffection with the sports media and their role in it. There are strains of contempt for the industry, and self-doubt.
- A key theme that emerges is the participant's confused state about their professional status: are they a journalist or, due to their work with a competition's official broadcast programme, are they working more in the realm of public relations? This point emerges at the very start, and as the interview progresses, develops into something of a professional existential crisis. At the start they state: “I'm not a bobby on the beat as it were anymore and because I kind of work for a little bit of, again, for more of a propaganda machine in terms of [REDACTED]. You know, you're working for the [REDACTED] so it's so sanitised now... I don't ask awkward questions any more” (p1). The asking of difficult questions is viewed by them as defining of a genuine sports journalist, and by not doing that they view themselves as contributing to a “propaganda machine”. Giving an example of a story they couldn't broadcast because they were working for a client, Kappa continues: “I mean to begin with I didn't feel like I was really being a journalist, if I'm honest. When I first started doing it, it sat very uncomfortably with me” (p1). However, Kappa states they now automatically “filter” (in other words, self-censors) certain content that they feel the client would not want them to cover. “I think I'm used to it now, so I filter... That kind of stuff jars a little bit with me” (p1-2). While rejecting the notion of them having a dual identity, they do say that they frequently move between two approaches. “I can move between them because some Saturdays I'm working for [REDACTED] covering a [REDACTED]

match and doing post-match interviews and sometimes I'm working for . So, umm, for , for example, if there were any pitch invasions, problems, etcetera on a match when I've got my hat on that's not something I would then tweet about, talk about, because I'm there, you know, under their umbrella. For that's something I can then immediately talk about, umm, highlight – racism, for example, if I heard anything I would have to be really careful, umm, because we're protecting the brand. I would have to be very careful, umm, what I said and who I said it to because I'm there being paid by essentially to work, whereas if I was working for then I can say what I like" (p2). The coverage is, they say again, "sanitized" and it is this process of being involved in the sanitization that seems to cause them, at moments, professional angst.

- Later, when asked about their view on the usefulness of tags such as 'fans with typewriters' to describe sports journalists, Kappa makes their most vivid statement of exasperation at the current state of sports journalism: "Umm, journalism is about passion, umm, it's about truth... Totally depends on what, I mean, I think journalism has become more opinion-based than ever before. Even when you are a local journalist reporting on your local team... I don't know how, I don't know how to articulate this at all. God, I don't why I'm even working in this fucking industry. Say that out loud! [Laughs] It does make you feel like that sometimes" (p11). The desire for a simpler form of sports journalism is then hinted at a little later in the interview: "I would probably say I'm quite a simple person. I get sent to a game, I want to report on the game. I'm not really a hardened breaking news journalist, I would say" (p12). This then leads to a confession of being overwhelmed by the current nature of their work, a point that preoccupies the participant for much of the remainder of the interview, and which culminates in them pondering their own future in the industry. "I would say my biggest problem being a freelancer is that I suffer from massive overwhelm. There is so much – I cannot just focus on one thing, umm, and give it 100 per cent attention, which means I can't be an expert on anything" (p13). And again: "It's really noisy. I don't know if that's just me getting old. I feel like I am getting old and I, I mean, and I think also as a freelancer it's really difficult because you are, it is busy, it's always busy. Umm, and then because you're supposed to be on top of everything that probably adds to the overwhelm, I would say... I still think there are outstanding journalists out there who are determined to get the truth no matter what and I'm so pleased they're still there. I would say from my personal point of view I've probably along the way lost that a little bit, erm, I just don't have enough time, I would say. But there are still people out there doing really good work. I'm trying not to be too negative about an industry I really love" (p14).
- A sense of exhaustion with the industry and a desire for a "quiet life" is then stated, with a suggestion that the industry itself is exhausting itself. Kappa's refusal to want to engage anymore with the 24-hour nature of the sports journalism cycle, as they see it, prompts them to doubt their suitability for a future in the industry. "I think if, probably if I'm going to hold my hands up, a lot of what I do now is more money-orientated because I've got a mortgage and a life and I think I've decided that there is – there are – power people who are always going to be power people, and I'm not, I don't know whether I have enough fight in me to fight the power people, I think. I want a quiet life... I also think that that perhaps what will come out more and more is that a lot of people will be exhausted by it all, and that it's more and more competitive – you've got to be, you've literally got to work 24 hours a day, it feels, in order to be relevant, in order to be important, in order to be on top of everything, and, you know, I work 18 hours a day some days. Working 24 hours a day does not appeal to me and I think the older I've got the more I've just distinguished having a bit of a life as well is just as important. Umm, and I think a lot of really, really, really good journalists doing really, really, really good things that's their kind of reason to live as opposed to I've got other things in my life that I enjoy and want to do. And I don't, I think perhaps that makes me not

necessarily, umm, a journalist with a future maybe... I feel like there's a load of old stuffy old men working in this industry who are still banging on about the good old days of journalism and they're still acting as though they work on papers, and I just don't think that's the way the industry is going. And it's certainly something that I've stepped away from and am not, you know... It's exhausting. Really exhausting, actually" (p14-15).

- Questions around a sports journalist's duties become connected with questions of journalistic identity. The duties "depends on the agenda", Kappa says, before soon adding: "There's a big part of me that doesn't feel as much as a journalist now as I used to be, perhaps" (p3).
- The participant is concerned that social media, both for young sports journalists and established big-name journalists, is a "narcissistic endeavour" where profile trumps accuracy. Considering young journalists, Kappa says: "You know, again, it becomes a narcissistic endeavour of – I want to get noticed, so I'm going to say this and see who picks up on it. Well, who's then going to find out whether that's true or not?" (p3). And for senior journalists, Kappa suggests the need to be a "personality" can eclipse the basic role and tasks of journalism. The following exchange illustrates the participant's concerns around this:

*Int10: It goes back to that issue of ego. And everybody, you know, journalists have now become personalities where they perhaps weren't in the past necessarily. Umm, and when you're a personality, umm, you have to, you have to put yourself out there a little bit, and perception is huge. And if you are perceived to know everybody and know all the little things that are going on, that's only going to be good for your own profile.*

*TB: Is that growth of, as you say, sort of journalists'/sports journalists' personality, is that closely associated with the rise of social media, do you think?*

*Int10: I think so, umm. Yeah. Everybody's trying to jostle for position and be the go-to person/station/paper/website. Umm, and with that comes noise and, yeah, with that comes fake news, slightly exaggerated news (p4).*

- Relatedly, Kappa views social media as a necessary evil of their profession. Kappa considers it "vile" and says they would not use it if they weren't a journalist.

*Int10: "If I'm really honest, if I didn't do this job I would not be on social media. I've got no interest in it whatsoever. I find it vile.*

*TB: But you feel a, it's almost an occupational necessity?*

*Int10: Absolutely. Yeah, I feel like I would not be relevant if I wasn't on it. And I feel like my – I'm going to sound like one of these, and this is what I hate – I feel like my profile wouldn't be high if I wasn't on it. And I feel nowadays that people are given jobs based on profile – think influencer" (p10).*

This is another section where contempt for the direction Kappa believes the industry is heading comes through.

- A recurring theme in the interview is mistrust of young journalists, who Kappa fears do not fact-check as thoroughly as they should and who are anxious to make a name for themselves through social media. This overall mistrust emerges in Kappa's response to a question about the extent of illegality among sports journalists. "No, no. Umm... but again I don't get involved in the heavy stuff, so I wouldn't really be, umm, and most, most journalists I encounter are very fair and wouldn't put a story out without having done their research. The younger kids I don't know so well, umm, I don't know... I don't really trust anybody anymore" (p8). That a question about law/ethics then becomes an expression of disillusion about the future is perhaps indicative of the wider existential angst about the industry and Kappa's place in it.
- The participant has a clear sense that a converged media requires a code that covers all news media, otherwise more traditional broadcasters are at a disadvantage to web-based outlets which can escape having to adhere to Ofcom regulations. "So Ofcom can massively hold radio and television to account, umm, which is superb, but I think from a broadcasting perspective that is then very frustrating when there are lots of things that television and radio companies cannot do or cannot say, but the internet seems to be able to do exactly what they want. And people on video, which is broadcasting, are able to do that on a bigger platform than perhaps what radio and television reach, umm, so why, why – they're not held to account is something that is something massively overdue being addressed, I would say... Print media now do their own stuff online, they do their own videos, so, yeah, we're all under the same umbrella... It's all the same. It has to be under the same umbrella" (p5). Moreover, Kappa regards codes as vital as a means of ensuring the media is held to account and differentiated from amateur content, otherwise fake news could proliferate. The existence and adherence to codes is bound up in the participant's mind with defining what it is to be a professional journalist. "I don't think the internet has to be free. The press have to be free in one point of view, but you also have to be held to account or otherwise you are gonna get people who are not trained journalists who have their own agendas, or somebody else's agenda, that are then gonna be... purporting fake news. You have to stop that. You know, I 100 per cent believe in freedom of the press but there has to be a code of ethics that everybody abides by otherwise it is open for abuse... I've been trained whereas, you know, I could... Joe Bloggs next to me hasn't been trained and doesn't actually know the implication of getting stuff wrong, or misreporting facts" (p6).
- The demand for speedily produced material, when combined with the flow of content on Twitter, inexperienced staff and the fear of being behind in the coverage of a story, is making verification challenging. "Now newsrooms have Twitter, and they're the sources. They're not verifiable... You know, without having their number, ringing them, going and meeting them – well, who's got time to do that? People don't. And it's a fast-paced medium [clicks fingers on last three words of sentence]. And you're getting stuff out there, and then you've got inexperienced journalists seeing something and immediately thinking it's fact, retweeting, sending it out, giving it... so TV and radio in particular, because that's where my expertise is, have a responsibility to only read out/show, you know, things that have been verified but how do you go and do that, and when there's a load of speculation going on on Twitter and the news story is happening on the social media platform and you're way behind" (p7).
- The participant readily admits to self-censoring their radio punditry and social media, primarily out of concern at how what they say will be portrayed and twisted on social media. Kappa goes on to say that they enjoy broadcasting less as a consequence. "I'm probably over-cautious. I probably overly self-censor because stuff gets twisted all the time and so I'm really conscious, I mean I'm quite, I'm really careful what I put on Twitter. I'm actually nervous – I've been doing stuff back on [REDACTED] again – I'm actually nervous about it. I

can't enjoy – I don't enjoy myself broadcasting as much as I used to because everybody just wants to pick up on one negative thing that you've said or twist something you've said and, as I say, that then becomes fact, even when it's taken out of context, and because you don't have a right of reply and because I don't spend my life on social media, umm, there's then a worry that people have got a perception of you or your opinion or that you slagged someone – you know, say for example I mentioned a manager's name, umm, and said 'Yeah, I don't really enjoy interviewing him particularly'" (p9).

### Appendix 3k): Emerging Themes Record Sheet from IPA Interviews

**GRAY 25%:** Potential causes of self-censorship/nature of self-censorship: a) relationship with sportsperson one is on friendly terms with, and self-policing what one puts in/leaves out/careful choice of words (Beta, Gamma, Zeta, Theta); b) preserving contacts more broadly, but sometimes being prepared to publish anyway, sometimes “abdicating responsibility” to the newsdesk (Alpha, Delta, Zeta, Eta, Theta); c) fear of getting facts wrong and then being criticised on digital platforms (Theta); d) respecting on/off record distinction, even in matters of potential public interest (Epsilon); e) fear of defamation/legal action (Alpha, Eta); f) wariness of voicing the “wrong” view or story angle on social media and receiving a hostile reaction, or fear of one’s words or opinion being “twisted” on social media (Alpha, Kappa); g) information not in public interest (Beta, Gamma); h) not provoking “silly spats” on social media or being too emotional – the digital equivalent of not ‘cheering in the press box’ (Gamma); i) respect for not potentially triggering “bashing” of a public figure (Delta, Epsilon, Beta); j) to benefit a reporter’s own standing on social media (Iota); k) duty of care to sportspeople (Beta, Delta, Epsilon); l) not wanting to taint a sport one loves, is a fan of, and has grown up with (Eta); m) preserving one’s career, including one’s relationship with other journalists, and for the sake of a “quiet life” (Eta); n) “filter” varies depending on whom one is working for (Kappa)

**YELLOW:** Social media and other means of digital interactivity creating greater sense of scrutiny and accountability to audiences, and greater anticipation of audience reaction; readers interacting critically/abusively with journalists, even in person having read content via social media; journalists being wary of articles shared on social media opening up subjects to ridicule (Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, Epsilon, Theta, Iota)

**DARK YELLOW:** Social media facilitating the spread of inaccuracies (Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, Zeta, Eta, Theta, Kappa)

**BRIGHT GREEN:** Speed versus accuracy in the digital age, with connected issues of churnalism, content reduction, non-subbing and workload (Beta, Gamma, Epsilon, Eta, Theta, Kappa)

**GREEN:** Digital environment prompting changes in working patterns, a shifting focus for sports journalists, laziness/dependence on social media; and/or new competition (e.g. clubs themselves) (Beta, Gamma, Delta, Epsilon, Zeta, Eta, Theta)

**TEAL:** Quest for online audience figures as negatively guiding editorial decision-making – stimulating clickbait, non-journalism and overlooking sports that don’t generate hits; sensitivity to accusation of producing “clickbait” content (Beta, Gamma, Delta, Epsilon, Zeta, Eta, Theta)

**GRAY 50%:** Social media as a platform for sports journalists to build their profile/brand, sometimes out of necessity rather than preference (Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Theta, Iota, Kappa)



**TURQUOISE:** The duties and ethical qualities of sports journalists, and essential characteristics; some unwritten but tacitly accepted (Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, Epsilon, Zeta, Eta, Theta, Iota, Kappa)

**PINK:** Codes of conduct: limited relevance, unimportant; “not my territory” or something that someone else at the outlet will deal with; or internal standards make external code of limited relevance (Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, Zeta, Eta, Theta)

**Pink** Codes of conduct: relevant, useful and significant - principles absorbed through years of working in environment; or compliance with code ensures “trusted source”/professional status for an outlet as distinct from other material on the internet; or important but in need of revision in light of digital material (Beta, Delta, Epsilon, Eta, Iota, Kappa)

**BLUE:** Illegality/breaches of codes of conduct by interviewee or their colleagues – sometimes through ignorance; publishing stories that are known not to be true or likely not to be true; other sports journalists turning a “blind eye”; making ghost-written columns up or “manipulating” the opinion (Zeta, Eta, Theta, Iota)

**Blue:** No illegality/breaches of codes of conduct (Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, Epsilon, Zeta, Eta, Iota, Kappa)

**RED:** Sports journalism as being non-uniform; composed of different activities; the cheerleading-watchdog continuum; time pressures and/or appeals to younger audience affecting split of hard-soft output (Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, Epsilon, Zeta, Eta, Theta, Kappa)

**Green:** Clubs, through press officers, increasingly seeking to “sanitize” content through reduced access, eliminating “dissenting voices” and the process of holding to account, and emerging as media rivals (Beta, Gamma, Zeta, Eta, Kappa)

**Red:** Poor questioning/interviewing technique preventing the truth from emerging (Zeta)

**VIOLET:** Members of the media behaving badly to other members of the media; self-policing by the sports journalism pack when some bad behaviour occurs (Alpha, Epsilon)

**Yellow:** Rule of fear leading to mental health issues; fear of missing stories a motivating factor (Beta)

**Turquoise:** Economic censorship (Zeta)

**Bold:** Sense of existential frustration with the industry and of being overwhelmed/burned out (Kappa)

**Redacted:** Redacted

## Appendix 4: Diary Data

### 4a) November Diary

**PARTICIPANT NAME: NOVEMBER**

**Dates diary kept: June 2018 - January 2019**

**Tuesday, 5 June 2018:**

**Story:** Aston Villa chief executive Keith Wyness suspended

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/44376099>

**What happened:** Aston Villa released an official statement, saying that chief executive Keith Wyness had been suspended. They did not provide a reason, so we ran an initial straight website story accordingly.

BBC WM then began to run the story that Wyness had been suspended “in connection with a missed tax payment”. We then changed our online story to reflect what was being run by our colleagues in BBC local radio.

However, around an hour later, it emerged that the two issues were not connected. BBC WM backtracked on how they were reporting the story and, as such, we did likewise online. The incorrect story was up for around an hour and received around 88,000 page views in that time.

**Reflections:**

As the BBC, this was a regretful turn of events as, for a while, we ended up reporting something online that was ultimately not true. People come to the BBC to provide definitive coverage of a story and there were 88,000 page views at a time when Wyness’ suspension was being linked to the unpaid tax bill. The story was, however, corrected at the first available opportunity.

This also throws up another conundrum – how much do you actually trust the copy of others, even within the same organisation? If a story is running on air, as it was in this case, you would imagine it has already gone through the relevant checks and balances in terms of standing it up.

I wouldn’t want to stop trusting stories brought in by BBC local radio, but it may be that we need to consider doing our own further checks around the most high-profile and sensitive stories.

**Wednesday, 6 June:**

**Story:** Aston Villa ‘went to casino and it hasn’t worked’

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/44382488>

**What happened:** Essentially, a follow-up to the previous day’s story based on interviews given to the BBC WM breakfast show with former Aston Villa finance director Mark Ansell and University of Liverpool football finance expert Kieran Maguire.

The story was written up, nosed on an excellent quote from Ansell saying that Villa had “gone to the casino, rolled the dice” and is hasn’t worked, in reference to the money they had spent in the Championship and the fact they were now being chased for a £4m unpaid tax bill.

Maguire’s quotes were used as an analysis to give us greater editorial leeway given the speculative nature of some of them.

Some of Ansell's quotes were also speculative, talking about a possible role for insolvency expert Trevor Birch (who was previously involved at Leeds, Portsmouth among others), which had been reported by the Daily Telegraph.

However, I took the decision to leave those comments and speculation out of the story as we were unable to stand that up for ourselves.

**Reflections:**

Given the previous day's events, I simply wasn't comfortable running comments speculating on events that the BBC had not stood up – and neither were other colleagues I discussed this with.

It was a decision that was justified when in Villa's next statement a couple of days later, they insisted that no insolvency or administration experts were working with them.

However, we still ended up with a strong story based on good quotes, context of the situation Aston Villa were in and in-depth analysis of the situation from an expert in football finance.

**Friday, 6 July:**

**Story: Bolton players strike over unpaid wage claim**

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/44747316>

**What happened:** I was alerted to a piece in the Bolton News at 19:50 BST on Friday, 6 July based on a statement claimed to be Bolton's players that they had refused to play the following day's friendly at St Mirren. Clearly, this was only from one source – albeit a reliable one as Marc Isles has covered the Trotters for the Bolton News for years. We set about making some checks to try to stand it up but decided to proceed with the story, crediting the Bolton News as the source of the statement once we had confirmation from both St Mirren and Bolton that the game was indeed off. An initial story was published but updated shortly afterwards to include Bolton's statement (which had initially left out as it simply confirmed the game was off and apologised to fans for the inconvenience) so there was some kind of response included. We also made it clear that Bolton had been contacted by BBC Radio Manchester, who had seen the players' statement, for a response.

**Reflections:** Although I was happy with the initial story that was published, as we made it clear that the Bolton News was the source of the claims, in hindsight we should have mentioned the request for the response and made it clear that Bolton had confirmed the game was off in the initial take. Normally, as the BBC, the aim is to double source everything. However, in this case, it was clear the players had put their trust in a journalist who has covered the club for years to break his particular story. Once the postponement was confirmed by both clubs, that was good enough for me and the duty news editor in Salford to run the story.

**Wednesday, 25 July:**

**Boreham Wood v Morgan Ferrier and his agent**

<https://www.borehamwoodfootballclub.co.uk/uncategorized/football-must-win-this-one/>  
<https://www.borehamwoodfootballclub.co.uk/uncategorized/player-statement-morgan-ferrier/>

**What happened:** On Saturday, 21 July, we were alerted to a statement ('football must win this one') released by [redacted] regarding an issue they were experiencing between themselves and their forward [redacted] and his agent. The statement accused the agent of bullying and using underhand means to try to force and

move for ██████, including claiming that the club were in breach of contract, which they refuted. Some of the claims made against the agent were clearly libellous and even without naming him represented a legal risk as there were clearly others who would be able to identify him as the player's agent. **Although a story was prepared, nothing was published. Legal advice was also taken.** BBC ██████ knew the agency who represented ██████ and put a call in but received no response. The following Wednesday (25 July) the club issued another statement including an apology by ██████ and this time naming the agent. It stood by their accusations. This time we contacted the agent directly via social media but again received no response. Given the seriousness of the accusations and the level of the story (fifth tier of English Football) we decided against publishing without any right of reply.

**Reflections:** **Although the decision was taken not to publish, I still believe in hindsight that was the right one. It was after all a spat between a fifth-tier club and an agent and had it been a more high-profile case then we may have considered things differently. However, the accusations were serious and represented a risk of defamation and, to my mind, would have really benefited from a right of reply.**

**Friday, 27 July:**

**Story: QPR agree £42m settlement with EFL after breaking spending rules**

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/44980113>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/44984660>

**What happened:** The EFL issued an embargoed press release early that morning confirming that QPR had agreed to a £42m settlement with the league after breaking Financial Fair Play rules when winning promotion to the Premier League in 2014-15. The initial story reporting the facts was straightforward enough. However, we also pursued a follow-up with two football finance experts – Rob Wilson, from Sheffield Hallam University, and Kieran Maguire, from the University of Liverpool – who told us that the settlement was “no disincentive” to other clubs to overspend. Clearly, as experts in their field they are entitled to such strong opinions and hence we opted to run the story as a follow up. For balance we approached the EFL for their response, but they declined saying that they didn't feel they needed to respond to every opinion about their ruling.

**Reflections:** **Offering people and organisations the right of reply remains the right thing to do, even if they choose then not to accept it. Not offering someone a response to a story which is then published and they feel then misrepresents them is much worse.**

**Tuesday, 14 August:**

**Story: 'They could play in empty stadiums and still make money'**

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/44850888>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/45085844>

**What happened:** This story was two years in the making as part of a joint project between my BBC Sport England team and the BBC England data unit. Between us we trawled through four years' worth of Premier League and EFL football club accounts available from Companies House and built a huge dataset. One of the things we wanted to look at was the impact of the current record-breaking TV deal on the Premier League and whether or not the paying fan was still as important to the running of a club as they have been historically. We found that in 2016-17, 11 of the 20 Premier League clubs could still have made a profit without taking ticket income into consideration. Fans were much more important to clubs financially in the EFL. Although the data findings were the story, we wanted voices for the

piece and had already approached two football finance experts, the Football Supporters' Federation and the Premier League for comment. We also initially pinpointed a couple of the Premier League clubs who could make a profit without ticket income, a couple of the clubs most reliant on their fans (and got knocked back), and supporters groups at Blackpool and Charlton where fan protests and boycotts are hitting their clubs in the pockets. However, following a conversation with one of our casuals who used to work in a football club press office, we decided to contact every one of the Premier League clubs who could make a profit without ticket money to both warn them that the story was coming and offering them a chance to speak to us. It proved to be an inspired decision as we then had responses from Crystal Palace, Swansea, Hull and Tottenham which could not only go into our main piece but also provided a follow-up on how their supporters remain massively important to them.

**Reflections:** Technically, offering the clubs a right of reply in this case wasn't necessary as we weren't making allegations or claims against them – it was a matter of fact. But doing so provided us with an even stronger story than we had in the first place. I'm convinced this is what helped us sell to story to other outlets within the BBC, to the point that it was picked up by BBC Radio 2, 4, 5 live, local radio, local TV and had a slot on the 6pm news.

**Friday, 7 September:**

**Story: 'EFL to stream Saturday 15:00 BST kick-offs for first time'**

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/45448523>

**What happened:** On the morning of Friday, 7 September, we were alerted to some strong tweets from Accrington owner Andy Holt criticising the fact that the following day's EFL games were available to be streamed on clubs' iFollow platforms. Saturday 3pm kick-offs are generally part of the national blackout of live football, designed, in part to protect attendances. Holt suggested he was unaware of the fact that games would be available to be streamed and was very critical of the situation. It appeared, on the face of it, to be a strong line in its own right. However, I wanted to ensure that we got our facts right and ended up with a balanced story. As a result, there were three things I wanted us to do: 1) check the facts – were games really being streamed, was it the first time Saturday EFL games were going to be available as a legal stream? etc 2) find out what was making this possible given the usual blackout, and 3) get a response from the EFL, which would also help cover off whether or not the clubs were aware of the situation.

Helpfully, Holt's tweets helped us cover off one of those issues in that he quoted piece of Uefa legislation about televising of games, which revealed that Saturday 3pm kick-offs were only blacked out for TV/streaming outside of international breaks. During international breaks they could be shown – essentially confirming that clubs could stream their games the following day. We were also able to determine that it was the first time it was happening – partly because of technological reasons. We were also able to liaise with the EFL (and other clubs) to obtain their response/reaction and ultimately produce a balanced story expressing both sides of the argument.

**Reflections:** This story would have been very easy to run simply from Holt's tweets. He's an outspoken owner of one of the EFL's smaller clubs, for which getting people through the turnstiles is paramount. However, his is only one point of view. This wasn't a breaking story that needed immediate action – it was a story that I felt needed more digging, especially when as the BBC maintaining our impartiality should always be at the forefront of our minds, rather than just chasing cheap headlines. Having that dialogue with the EFL from the

start and taking time to explore the subject before diving into publishing a story also helped us maintain our relationship with them. Writing the story just from Holt's take on the subject could have been construed as "bashing them over the head" for a sake of a few cheap hits.

**Wednesday, 17 October:**

**Story: 'Crewe Alexandra: Youth coach Carl Everall suspended over safeguarding issue'**

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/45895478>

**What happened:** We were alerted to a story running in the Guardian about Crewe youth coach Carl Everall being suspended over a "safeguarding issue" which Sports News, in Salford were chasing. Given the Barry Bennell child sex abuse court case partly relating to his time at Crewe, this was potentially the start of another big story in that vein. To help out at a busy time, we were asked to start a template off by adding pictures and background while the story was pursued. The Guardian story mentioned the backdrop of the Bennell case. However, a colleague tasked with the job of preparing the template, was uneasy of including that as background as there was no suggestion, at that stage, that the two cases were linked and there was no detail of what Everall was accused of. We talked it through, raised our concerns with Salford and decided that the best course of action was to leave it out and play the story straight, which is what we did in the end.

**Reflections:** In my mind that was the best course of action. Linking the two cases could have potentially carried a danger of defamation if they were, in fact, not connected. Given the public interest in the story off the back of the Bennell case then we were correct to run the story once stood up but, with further disciplinary action a possibility, to run it as straight as possible, complete with general pictures.

**Friday, 19 October:**

**Story: 'Nuneaton Borough: Ownership mystery puts club on the brink'**

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/45877754>

**What happened:** As a National League South side, Nuneaton Borough are not a side we would usually cover. However, when a tweet from a supporter was flagged up to us linking to an interview the manager, Nicky Eaden, had done with Free Radio suggesting that the club could be days away from folding, there had been no hot water in the showers since August and he'd had to give team talks in the dark because the dressing room lights had gone off when generators ran out of fuel, then there seemed to be a good, wider interest story there that was more than goals being scored, players being signed etc. Changes to our rota at work has freed up time to allow people to work off-rota on original journalism, so I was able to give the story to a reporter to investigate. We initially thought it might be a quick turnaround story. However, the more we dug into the story, the more messy the story became. It transpired that the problems the club were experiencing were a result of confusion as to who owned the club. [REDACTED], who worked on the story, initially spoke to Eaden, but then got hold of Lee Thorn, who had owned the club, but believed he had sold it to Norman Smurthwaite, who also owns Port Vale, during the summer and had been removed as a director. Nuneaton's place in the football pyramid would actually prevent Smurthwaite from owning both clubs at the same time. Those allegations meant we then had to approach Smurthwaite, who claimed he had only bought Nuneaton's ground and was simply trying to facilitate the sale of the club. One issue did remain though, in that following Thorn's 'sale' of the club, the shares had not been reallocated to anyone. Effectively, with

no one claiming to be owners of Nuneaton, the club was a rudderless ship – hence the problems Eaden and his players were experiencing – which gave us a fresh approach into the story. Given some of the claims and counter claims being made by Thorn and Smurtwaite, we ensured we also approached the EFL and National League for comment, to ensure they were aware of the situation and to ask whether, as far as they were concerned, everything was above board. With all the calls that we had to make and the investigative journalism [REDACTED] had to do as the story unfolded, we ended up publishing five days after initially starting to pursue it. I believe we ended up with a well-balanced story, which was well promoted by both the BBC Sport and News websites and which also generated debate on social media.

**Reflections:** This turned out to be a more complicated story to get over the line than we envisaged when we set out. The more [REDACTED] dug into it, different questions that needed answering emerged. A lot of the investigative work and briefings were also done off the record, included claims and counter claims, which provided plenty of non-attributed background but meant we also had to be mindful when reporting what we had been told. We also had to take into consideration veiled threats of litigation by Smurthwaite if we implied any impropriety on his part. That was never our intention as we only had hearsay from Thorn and no solid evidence that he was owner of two clubs at the same time. By concentrating our angle on the confusion over the ownership enabled us to set out the parlous state the club was in but also ensured we didn't attribute blame or wrongdoing. It also ensured that we still had a strong story.

**Saturday, 24 November:**

**Story: England stars show support for goalkeeper after stroke**

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/46324271>

**What happened:** This story was initially spotted on social media when Kent Football United Ladies tweeted photos of their goalkeeper Jordan Dawes smiling in hospital and stating that she had suffered a stroke. With them being a very low level side, we tried to ascertain in what context she had fallen ill – was it during a game, in training, in the clubhouse or at home? Our feeling was that given the level of the team it had to be in a sporting context to merit a story. Having drawn a blank when contacting the club – the members of which were only volunteers given their level - for further details we decided that the best course of action was to base the story on the reaction to their post, including a message from England women's striker Fran Kirby. Our intention was to then hopefully follow up with the family at a later date but decided to respect their privacy when, a few days later, they revealed that Jordan was sadly suffering from liver cancer, a story we covered simply by referencing their social media post (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/46387857>).

**Reflections:** Social media is an important tool in the news gathering process in this day and age but it doesn't always tick all the checks and balances you should go through when producing a story. Obviously, when you know something is from a verified source then that's a help but other material can require thorough checking. In this case effort was made to go through the checks and balances but even without complete success we were still able to produce a story. In my mind we also did the right thing by leaving the family alone as they came to terms with the horrible news about the cancer diagnosis.

**Wednesday, 12 December:**

**Story: How making up for lost time is helping ex-England rugby league player Scott Moore**



## rebuild

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/rugby-league/46494915>

**What happened:** Former England rugby league forward had spent time in jail after being convicted of dangerous driving and assaulting a police officer. His was a story we had been following since his arrest and one we were keen to give him an opportunity to talk about when the opportunity arose. His return to the sport with Rochdale Hornets was always going to be high-profile and gave us a chance to request an interview. My colleague [REDACTED] asked the question, Moore agreed and so went over to Rochdale in person. What we ended up with was a really powerful piece of human interest journalism with an interviewee who was willing to talk candidly about his experiences which we were able to use both on the BBC Sport website and hopefully in a forthcoming BBC Rugby League podcast.

**Reflections:** Keeping this on the diary and at the forefront of minds helped us identify an interview opportunity when it arose. The way the story was presented and treated – a powerful story delivered with empathy - also shows the value a reporter doing their homework and knowing their subject before doing an interview. Quite simply, you get better material and you do not have to present content in a sensationalist way to make something a good story.

## Friday, 21 December:

### Story: Gerrard 'racist joke' sanction 'lenient'

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/46651100>

**What happened:** The day after Carlisle put out a statement saying that an unnamed player had been given a letter of warning by the FA and warned about his future conduct for something that had happened at a previous club, Oldham took the step of releasing a statement to say that they believed that the punishment of a former employee for 'racist behaviour' was lenient. The two statements and further careful checking created a jigsaw that made it clear that it related to Anthony Gerrard, who has been sacked by Oldham in August. Calls were made to the FA to offer them a response to Oldham's criticism and to allow them to confirm the nature of Gerrard's punishment. Armed with all the information, we were able to pull together a balanced story on quite a delicate matter and tie in relevant context around other racist incidents around football at the time in question.

**Reflections:** Having all the pieces in the puzzle to identify Gerrard as the subject of the punishment by the FA and the subject of the investigation that Oldham believed was flawed was key to being able to do the story properly. Sometimes official club statements don't tell the full story and you need to make further enquiries to be able to ascertain all the facts. Putting a call into the FA to offer them a right of reply to Oldham's point of view was the right thing to do and it was their prerogative not to take it up.

## Monday, 30 December:

### Story: Diamond could face RFU investigation

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/rugby-union/46715798>

**What happened:** Following Sale's win at Gloucester on Saturday, 29 December, we were alerted to a story and video in the Daily Telegraph regarding an altercation between a journalist and Sale's director of rugby Steve Diamond. The pair had previous history as the journalist, Sam Peters, had criticised Diamond's methods and described him as a "bully" during the pair's altercation. Before attempting to produce a story we made enquiries to



confirm the authenticity of the video. Having done so, we then needed to find a new way into the story given that the altercation had become THE story and overshadowed the Sharks' win in many of the Sundays. As a result we put in calls to both the RFU and Sale to ask if action might be taken or if the club wanted to respond. The RFU's guidance that they would look into the incident should a complaint be received gave us a fresh way into the story, while the club said they were more likely to respond at a later date following a club meeting. The story was updated when Peters said he would not be making a complaint. Two days later Diamond defended his method, which we also covered to ensure balance to our coverage.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/rugby-union/46732443>

**Reflections:** Stories essentially about other people's reports and altercations are always tricky one to gauge when it comes to covering them yourself. However, as this one involved the director of rugby of a Premiership club there was a clear public interest to it. It was important to my mind that we looked for a fresh way into the story given that we did not have representation at the Sale v Gloucester game, so, to a degree, what we had been reading in other publications and on the wires was hearsay. Having finally found a new way into the story, it was then important that we then followed it to its conclusion and offered Diamond his right of reply when he defended his methods on 1 January – three days after the match and altercation took place.

**Monday, 7 January:**

**Story: Doidge's move from Forest Green to Bolton collapses**

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/46780447>

**What happened:** This story emerged when Forest Green issued a statement threatening to take legal action against Bolton Wanderers when a deal for striker Christian Doidge to complete his move to the Championship club collapsed. Forest Green's chairman Dale Vince claimed that Bolton had taken out a contract to loan and then buy Doidge without the means to honour it, and had not paid the player's wages for four months. Vince made some strong allegations both in the statement and then in a subsequent interview with BBC Radio Gloucestershire that required giving Bolton the opportunity to respond. We also needed to approach the EFL for comment on the situation involving two of their members. We ended up with a balanced story containing the viewpoints of all three parties, although this proved to be only the start of an ongoing public spat between the clubs over the coming days. Vince offered Bolton fans a free pint if they went to Forest Green's home fixture with Bury in January and launched a range of 'No Ken Do' T-shirts in way of criticism of Wanderers owner and chairman Ken Anderson. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/46802809> In turn, Anderson responded with a lengthy and rambling statement offering to launch his own range of 'Yes We Ken' T-shirts and described Vince as "one of the strangest people I have ever come across in football". <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/46813409>

**Reflections:** This was an ongoing story, which rumbled on for several days as both sides made claim and counter claim. The most important thing to consider when covering this story was ensuring balance. As an impartial broadcaster and publisher, the BBC – or indeed any independent publisher – should not be seen to be taking sides. As such and as far as possible the views of both sides should be contained within every story – even if it is just a line – to offer that balance. It also means you have to be consistent with your coverage – once we had decided to write the story about Vince offering free pints and selling his T-

shirts, it was only right that Anderson's statement in response was also covered the following day.

**Friday, 11 January:**

**Story: Leeds boss Bielsa 'responsible' for training 'spy'**

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/46840353>

**What happened:** On the morning of Friday, 11 January our attention was drawn to two tweets from Derbyshire Police regarding an incident they had been called to the previous day at Derby County's training ground, 24 hours before their key Championship match against then leaders Leeds United. The tweets were contradictory – one saying they had escorted a 'spy' from outside the premises and the other saying that nothing untoward had happened. The tweets were put to both clubs who initially said they would be making no comment. Calls were also put to the police to clarify what was meant by the tweet given reports in the Daily Telegraph that an employee of Leeds had been spying on Derby's training session. Having been unable to stand that story up initially, we put it to one side to make further enquires as the BBC's policy is to only run a story from unofficial channels when there are two sources.

Then, on the Friday afternoon, Derby County confirmed in an official club statement that an employee of Leeds had been removed from outside their training ground. This enabled us to start the story off and use the police statement which had said no one was arrested and seemed to play down the story: "Officers conducted routine checks which were all above board. Despite media reports, no damage to the fence was found, and the man was stopped outside the grounds."

A call was put in to the EFL to give them an opportunity to respond to a story involving two of their member clubs.

The story then moved on quickly that evening as during a TV interview before the game with Derby, Leeds boss Marcelo Bielsa admitted responsibility and confirmed that he had sent a member of his staff to watch the Rams train.

The following day, Leeds issued a statement saying they would be reminding Bielsa of the club's "integrity and honesty". <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/46850155>

On 15 January, the EFL said they were formally investigating the incident following a complaint from Derby. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/46878453>

And on 16 January, Bielsa admitted that he watches all his team's opponents train during an unscheduled news conference which detailed the lengths he goes to to analyse rivals.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/46896639>

**Reflections:** This has certainly been one of the best stories that the team has worked on over the last 12 months. The removal of a spy from outside the training ground was barely believable in the first place, but for Bielsa to then take responsibility for it all was eye opening. His candidness also in a way made it a very straightforward story to report on – once the initial story broke all the other pieces of the puzzle slotted into place. It was then just a simple case of ensuring that our coverage was fair and accurate, which I believe it has been.

**Tuesday, 15 January:**

**Story: Police looking into Whyte lewd act video**

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/46876707>

**What happened:** Footage emerged on social media of Oxford United and Northern Ireland

international footballer Gavin Whyte and a friend dropping their trousers and attempting to masturbate in the street while on a night out in Northern Ireland. Oxford were quick to put out a statement confirming Whyte's involvement and confirming that he would be disciplined. Having that statement and another which swiftly followed from the Irish FA helped no end with piecing the story together – but what became more important was the tone with which we approached the story. It was where taking a few moments to consult the Editorial Guidelines and previous stories paid dividends and we were soon able to settle on the use of the term 'lewd act' to describe Whyte's actions. We were soon able to get an initial four paragraphs to the story agreed and published before adding further detail, quotes and context. The initial story was then updated further when the Police Service of Northern Ireland confirmed they were "conducting enquiries" into the incident.

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

#### Themes:

**YELLOW:** Trust (or lack of it) within one's own organisation regarding the accuracy of material that other sports journalists have provided

**GREEN:** Careful sourcing of stories/reluctance to run speculative stories, but instances when double-sourcing principle might be broken

**BLUE:** Reputation for impartiality and balance more important than "chasing cheap headlines", and therefore an emphasis on taking time over a story rather than rushing to publish

**GRAY:** Importance of patient, well-researched interview content delivered without sensationalism

**LIGHT GRAY:** Recourse to BBC Editorial Guidelines to help guide judgment on how to strike the appropriate tone for an article

**TURQUOISE:** Not running a story because of fear of libel action; or treading carefully in how a story is presented to avoid libel action

**PINK:** Importance of offering right of reply prior to publication, both legally/ethically and editorially in terms of content-gathering

**RED:** Off-diary time enabling a story to be properly investigated and published

**TEAL:** Benefits/drawbacks of social media as newsgathering tool

Initial distillation: There is a consistent sense of November being reflective, thoughtful, considered and driven by a keen professional sense of the public interest. The ethical principles of a commitment to accuracy, balance and impartiality infuse the reflections, seemingly reflecting the values that the participant's employer places at the heart of its mission and guidelines. While the idiom used by the diary-keeper is not deontological, the entries are permeated with a sense of how seriously he takes his professional responsibilities. Could this be a manifestation of the 'halo effect' or a manifestation of serious-minded ethical commitment? Given the consistency and depth, the latter seems more likely. This is not the diary of a superficial 'ball-watcher', but rather an editor with a commitment to covering the wider contextual stories of sport both thoroughly and ethically. There is a tone too of nurturing staff with a view to improving the depth of content. Despite the thorough-going professional tone, there is a hint of either conscious or unconscious irritation and frustration with colleagues who perhaps do not always meet his high standards.

## **Appendix 4b: Oscar Diary**

**PARTICIPANT NAME: OSCAR**

**Dates diary kept: April 2018 - June 2019**

**April 28, 2018 to May 1, 2018**

A national rugby journalist told me the rugby club I cover had offered a contract to a high-profile player from a rival team. He identified his source and it was a very good one.

With the club I cover having high-profile, contracted players in the same position as the target, such a signing could be potentially chaotic. They would neither be able to afford all three players, nor keep them happy.

At a social that same weekend I spoke to one of the players whose future would have been put in doubt. He had seen rumours on social media and was unsettled by them, but didn't know how true they were.

I withheld some of the information I knew at that time, but by the time I was in a position to publish a story two days later, I felt I should tell the player the club were interested in signing the player in question.

I later found out that Bath no longer wanted to sign the player in question and wrote a follow-up story saying as much. The player I had informed was reassured about his future in a one-to-one meeting with the director of rugby. The target ended up signing for someone else.

**May 22, 2018**

In a one-to-one interview at the end of the season with a senior coach at the club I cover, he mentioned several players in the squad who had disappointed him during the campaign.

He felt one didn't work hard enough and hadn't developed as he should have done.

He felt another liked his social and nightlife too much and was not at the level he should be.

Although it wasn't explicitly agreed, I sensed this was all off the record. I didn't publish any details of that part of our conversation.

**March to October, 2018**

I have been doing my current job since 2015. During that time I have built various relationships with players, coaches, covert contacts, moles and management.

The relationship with management is always a delicate one. On the one hand, part of my job is to hold them to account and be critical when criticism is justified.

I also need to have a working relationship and, on occasion, rely on them to be given advanced warning of embargoed announcements.

The moral dilemma is about getting too close. If I am told too much information off the record, my hands can be tied by my moral and professional cornerstone of not publishing off-the-record information.

On occasion, I have been told significant information about future signings or coaching changes, then had to wait to publish a story at the same time as the club is announcing it.

The major risk with this is that another media organisations break the story in the meantime. This has happened several times and, when it does, it can be incredibly frustrating and defeats the object of being told in the first place.

Had I not been told by the management and got the information from another source off my own back, I could break the exclusive.

The bottom line is that I need to strike a balance between what I am told by senior management and keeping them at arms' length when it is in my interests to do so.

### **June 30, 2018**

After offering a player a contract extension and going on the record with me that they were keen to do so, other squad dynamics meant they ended up not being able to afford to keep him.

It was the latest in a long line of embarrassing contractual/player retention stories, especially once the player in question put a post on Instagram alluding to it.

I had to firm up the story but I knew the club would not want to comment. My tactic was to ask a team-mate of the player via direct Twitter message to pass on my number to the player in question to see if he wanted an on- or off-the-record conversation about what happened, so that I could get all the relevant details.

As it turned out, he didn't contact me. I had no moral problems asking the team-mate to pass on my number as I had built up a good relationship with him – I wouldn't ask every player – and in my eyes I was giving the subject of the story the opportunity to have his say.

### **August 15, 2018**

I had been told of a well-known player being paid off to leave the club early. I had been told when it was going to be announced and I knew that questions would inevitably be asked by the fans as the player was quite high profile.

I wanted the player to have the opportunity to get his side across, either on or off the record, as I sensed the press release from the club would be a whitewash and had been told by contacts that he had been poorly treated.

I private messaged said player on Twitter but he felt that for legal and other reasons it would not be wise for him to comment.

My other dilemma was that a key feature of his time at the club was an infamous incident he had been involved in, which had never been published, and which lowered him in the estimation of the coaches.

I was planning an opinion piece on his downward spiral at the club and felt I had to write about the incident as it was an important and interesting element of the timeline.

I didn't tell him I was going to write about this. If he was upset about it I thought he would have let me know. It was not a detail I could leave out of my truthful analysis of what had gone on.

### **August 14, 2018**

I had become aware of a foreign prop on trial at the club I cover. I didn't have enough information about him to do a story. However, at the club's media day he was included in the squad picture.

I recognised him but I didn't think many other media, if any, had recognised him. After the photoshoot the assembled media, including national newspapers and agencies, interviewed players and coaches.

I felt it would have been foolish to ask about the trialist in front of other journalists. Why would I want to give them a sniff of what could be an exclusive story?

I kept my powder dry and waited for an opportunity later in the week to ask a senior coach about the trialist, when there would be no competing media around, and had my exclusive.

### **August 23, 2018**

The club I cover had a date on which they were planning to launch their new kits. It was a lot later than most other clubs in their league.

In the mean-time, several sport shops put the kits on their websites for pre-order, a sponsor tweeted a picture of it (which was later deleted) and a promotional video was accidentally released early, which showed the kit.

It was fast becoming the world's worst-kept secret and I was seemingly the only one still keeping my end of the bargain.

I still stuck to my embargo agreement and ran the story when the club were ready to announce it. In my eyes, if you breach an embargo you shouldn't be given information in advance again.

### **September, 2018**

A member of senior management informed me of proposed future coaching changes at the club I cover.

As each week went by and it hadn't been announced – it was to be major news – I got increasingly nervous it would leak out. It soon became clear some fans had heard about the plans.

I tried to encourage the club to announce sooner rather than later. Eventually, they set a date for the announcement but also told a national journalist about the date. A foolish move, in my opinion.

The announcement was postponed and the national journalist ran the story anyway. The club had not explicitly said the information they had given him was off the record until an official announcement was made.

I would have been well within my rights to do a story straight away once the national journalist had published. However, I informed the club's communications team, made it clear I had to publish something soon and came to an agreement with them to write a story, withholding some information for the official announcement.

Although I was initially "scooped" through no fault of my own, I ended up getting two bites of the cherry so it didn't turn out too badly.

### **Mid-September, 2018**

A national journalist published an article saying the owner of the club I covered was on the brink of sacking a senior coach. The speculation spread to social media.

I knew for a fact this was not true because the coach in question had already signed a new contract, which had not yet been announced.

I found out who the journalist's source was, how the story came about and could completely understand why someone without my extra background knowledge would write such a story. In his position I would have done the same.

The coach in question was livid about the rumours, especially as he had signed a new deal but couldn't publicly say so.

I was tempted to tell him in private how the story came about but decided not to because protecting sources is a fundamental cornerstone of journalism.

That applies not only to my sources but to the sources of other journalists. It's not my place to disclose their sources.

### **January 8, 2019**

At a weekly media session, I interviewed a high-profile player alongside someone from the radio.

The player was in the final year of his contract, one of the highest paid players in the squad, and the question was whether he would be at the club next season?

His honesty shone through as he said he hadn't been offered a new deal and his time at the club was up. I sensed he wanted to stay if he could.

The press officer who sat in on the interview was not expecting his departure announcement and neither was the club's management.

As the answers had been recorded by the radio and it was such a big story, there was no way I wasn't going to run it on the website as soon as possible.

However, as the club had been taken by surprise and weren't ready to announce the player was leaving, I felt it was only fair to give them an opportunity to pull something together.

Along with the radio journalist, I embargoed myself for an hour to allow the club to get together a statement.

The club put out a statement at the same time as my story went live on the website. Three months later, the club offered the player in question a new deal, which he signed.

### **April, 2019**

In between interviews on a media day, I was asked by a member of the national media what I thought would happen to one of the older players in the team, who was out of contract at the end of the season.

With a press officer in earshot, I said I thought he would retire and do some coaching for the club. I knew he was working towards his coaching badges and I knew some of the current coaching team were leaving, so it was an educated guess.



The following day, I got a call from the CEO of the club saying he had been told what I had said and he wanted to explain to me why the player would, in fact, become part of the coaching team.

What I should have done was act as if I knew all along. However, I was honest and admitted I had been guessing, which in effect tied my hands because I was now being told something by the club I didn't already know as fact, "off the record". Had I known already, my hands wouldn't have been tied. The club would have just given it credence.

A week later, I got wind of another, more junior coaching appointment at the club. I was not going to stitch myself up this time. I double-checked my information and gave the club press office a heads up that I was going to run the story.

They really didn't want me to break the exclusive due to sensitivities about informing relevant parties.

The story about the player retiring and becoming a coach was a better story and more valuable to me, so I came to an agreement with the club.

I would run the story about the player becoming a coach and wait for the club to be ready to make the other announcement; running a story at the same time. It was horse-trading which left both parties satisfied and I got the exclusive I wanted.

#### **May 1, 2019**

I was invited to dinner with the club's CEO and future head coach. They were on the charm offensive; wanting me to buy into the club's long-term plans after several years of underachievement, instability and politics off the field.

It was agreed at the start of the dinner that everything discussed would be off the record.

Mutual trust from both sides built up over time meant this wasn't an issue. They revealed information to me and I gave my opinion and insight to them.

It was a productive evening in terms of adding to my background knowledge, even if it didn't make it into print.

#### **June 1, 2019**

I interviewed an ex-coach of the team about his time at the club. We had an on-the-record chat, followed by an off-the-record chat.

In the off-the-record segment he let off a lot of steam, confirmed many of the off-field and political issues I had already heard about and revealed some controversial and newsworthy details I didn't already know about.

The off-the-record quotes and detail was much more interesting than what could be printed.

I tried to persuade the coach to put some of the off-the-record quotes onto the record, but he was a gent and didn't feel it was worth publicly rocking the boat.

I wrote up the interview based on what had been agreed, with a couple of subtle hints that all had not been right behind the scenes.

#### **June 7, 2019**

I interviewed another coach who had departed from the club. I had heard second hand that he was bitter and upset about the way things had ended for him.

However, he made it clear he wanted the interview to come across as a positive one.

He got some things off his chest off the record to start with, then I recorded an on-the-record interview. Once the dictaphone was switched off, there was some more off-the-record chat.

It was clear to both parties what could and couldn't be published.

### Themes:

**YELLOW:** Not publishing newsworthy and potentially sensitive material from an interview despite their being no explicit statement from interviewee that it was off-the-record

**GREEN:** Moral dilemma arising from the closeness of the relationship with club management and not revealing off-the-record information. Respecting off-the-record discussions, even when the material is stronger than on-the-record material

**BLUE:** Using social media as a tool to reach out to players for information on stories

**GRAY:** Revealing previously unpublished material in order to provide a "truthful" analysis of a player's departure from a club

**LIGHT GRAY:** Ethical importance of sticking to an embargo, even when the information is leaking out elsewhere

**TURQUOISE:** Liaising with a club's PR department in the coverage of a story in a way that both preserves the relationship with the club and gets material: "horse trading"

**PINK:** The importance of protecting sources – both one's own and other journalists'

Initial distillation: The picture that emerges in the log is of the complexities involved in reporting in depth on a club that one is covering on a regular basis. Due to the closeness of the relationships that have developed between himself and the club, the participant is navigating a route that both keeps the club onside and which generates exclusive stories; in one instance he refers to this as "horse trading" with the club. From a strictly Kantian perspective, this arguably undermines Oscar's autonomy, as he is to some extent bending his will to the club and thereby adopting the journalistic hypothetical imperative rather than the categorical imperative. However, such pragmatism does not equate to weak sports journalism as Oscar is aware of the need to flex his independence on occasion; rather, it illustrates the complexities of covering the same club day in, day out as a beat reporter. A strong sense of respecting the on-diary/off-diary distinction emerges, as well as a sense of anticipating when certain segments are off the record. A firm sense of ethics also emerges in the adherence to embargoes and protection of sources. There is a willingness to put certain material into the public domain, even if that might upset contacts, if that is required to ensure the public has a full grasp of important issues affecting the club. Overall, there is a

sense that ethical reasoning is infused into the journalist's professional practice, and that this reasoning is integral to Oscar's activities as a sports journalist.

## Appendix 4c: Papa Diary

**PARTICIPANT NAME: PAPA**

**Dates diary kept: September 2018 - June 2019**

**Saturday, 8 September, 2018:**

**Story:** Doncaster's 37-year-old midfielder James Coppinger has given up his beloved chocolate in a bid to further prolong his career. He said: "My diet's never been bad. But I felt if I could find an extra edge it can only help. Chocolate was my one vice but I haven't touched it for weeks. Quite a few of the lads are now using a local company that delivers healthy meals."

**What happened:** Despite having never met the player, I have a good working relationship with Coppinger, whom I first spoke to via a club contact and have since been able to arrange interviews with over the phone. A previous piece for *The Sun* reflecting on the success he had enjoyed as coach of his sons' teams which included photographs of them with their trophies had built up trust between us and, as a senior player, he is very open and honest in his interviews.

**Reflections:** This chocolate quote from Coppinger was one that immediately made my ears prick up as a tabloid reporter. I afterwards considered whether this in any way could be damaging to his reputation as a professional – again out of consideration for my interviewee. However, given he is one of the oldest players in the Football League, I was more than satisfied this story, if anything, portrayed him in a positive light for the further sacrifices he is making in a bid to extend his career. Quotes were on the record, ultimately.

**Saturday, 20 October, 2018:**

**Story:** Birmingham captain Michael Morrison says the club are finally over Gary Rowett's exit ahead of facing their former manager, now at Stoke, that weekend. At the time of writing, Birmingham were unbeaten in their previous eight Championship games under Garry Monk – their best run since a seven-game streak without a loss under Rowett in the autumn of 2016 – before his surprise sacking that December with Birmingham seventh. They subsequently went on to escape relegation on the last day in both campaigns since with Rowett's successor Gianfranco Zola and Monk's predecessor Steve Cotterill's reigns both short-lived.

**What happened:** This was another community event I had been invited to by Birmingham to interview their player. The Birmingham hierarchy had been fiercely criticised for their decision to sack Rowett when the club were in such a strong position and this further intensified as their struggles under new managers ensued. Morrison's quotes included phrases such as "the last 18 months it has been a tough place to play at" and "I really enjoyed playing under Gary – it was some of my best times in football." He added: "It was two steps backwards but now we have made those strides forward again. The club has changed and we have a real philosophy."

**Reflections:** I did not get the impression from Morrison this was direct criticism of the Birmingham board, however the quotes were refreshingly honest and were open to interpretation, making for a potentially provocative headline/intro implying the club captain admitted mistakes had been made. However, given Rowett had left the club almost two years earlier, I felt the story still needed to be positioned in the present. My intro was: “Skipper Michael Morrison reckons Birmingham are finally over Gary Rowett’s exit.” I felt this achieved sufficient balance to satisfy both [REDACTED] with the focus on the positives in the present with a nod to their previous struggles. The aforementioned quotes were all at the top end of my story to ensure it was newsworthy.

**Saturday, 3 November, 2018:**

**Story:** James McClean becomes embroiled in fresh poppy row

**What happened:** I was asked to cover Stoke v Middlesbrough for [REDACTED]. On the face of it, a fairly routine Championship match, however this was Remembrance Day weekend and Derry-born McClean continued with his stance of opting out of wearing a poppy on his shirt – a move which historically led to friction with fans. McClean was brought on as a substitute late on and, once again, there was booing/verbal abuse from the stands – it later turned out that this had also been from Stoke’s own supporters as well as those of Boro but at the time neither I or any of those reporters sat close to me were aware of this.

I had been asked to file on the whistle due to this game being the late kick-off. The match finished 0-0 and, in terms of the ‘football’ story, promotion-chasing Middlesbrough drawing a blank once again under Tony Pulis was the strongest angle. Stoke were mid-table.

My report was filed on this angle on the final whistle, but no sooner had it been sent McClean then appeared have objects thrown at him by away fans as he headed towards the tunnel.

My feeling was that this should now be the new top line for the story but I called the desk and was told to send an ‘add par’ in addition to the raw quotes from the managers’ press conferences that had already been ordered for the subs to dress into my report.

Later that night McClean took to social media to label Stoke’s own fans – “uneducated cavemen.” It now appeared clear he had also been the target of abuse from them. His post added: “I am a PROUD FENIAN no c\*\*\* will ever change that, so sing away.”

By this time print deadline had already passed so I was told to follow this up on Sunday morning for Monday’s newspaper.

**Reflections:** I contacted a relevant, longstanding source to try to move the story forwards for Monday. Off-record views were expressed. To protect the source this was left out of the story. My own approach tends to be a cautious one in these instances. Building contacts to a point where they will trust you with sensitive information can take years. Without doubt, it is one of the hardest parts of the job. Therefore, my view has always been to fully respect and adhere to the wishes of a contact in terms of how information they provide is dealt with. I did also manage to glean that McClean would be spoken to when he reported for training the following day and asked to explain his actions. This suitably gave me a fresh angle to report for Monday’s newspaper, so I was satisfied I had done my job here.

**Saturday, 29 December, 2018**

**Story:** Veteran striker Luke Varney on his much-travelled career

**What happened:** A club contact at Cheltenham Town set up an interview with their new signing Luke Varney for a feature for **The Sun**. The angle I had in mind was that by joining the Robins he had now played in all four corners of England after playing for eleven clubs in as many years. They included Leeds in the north, Portsmouth in the south, Ipswich in the east and, now finally, Cheltenham in the West. Remarkably, for much of it he has commuted from the family home, which is in Leicester in the East Midlands.

**Reflections:** [redacted] came on to me to ask if I had any stories for their Christmas week Saturday edition, where early copy is essential. I had an interview with timeless quotes from Luke Varney that I'd conducted a couple of months prior in October ahead of the reverse fixture. Ideally, I would use quotes from interview access gained the week before a match but I was satisfied in this instance that the quotes were sufficiently timeless and in no way was Varney taken out of context. **The angle was more of a light-hearted tabloid feature looking back at the various areas of the country he had played in and how this move had completed the set. I sent a copy of the published piece to the club media department afterwards and they were grateful for the publicity and liked the way the story had been addressed, so this felt like a 'win, win' situation.**

**Tuesday, January 1:**

**Story:** Jamie Oliver rustled up a menu for the players at Forest Green Rovers as the world's first vegan football club took a starring role in his television show. Oliver and pal Jimmy Doherty descended on the squad at The New Lawn filming their new series Friday Night Feast on Channel Four.

**What happened:** I had noticed watching Jamie Oliver's Friday Night Feast that there was a trailer for the following week's show including Forest Green, a club with whom I have a good working relationship. Viewing this as a potentially strong story **for The Sun**, I contacted their media department and they told me they would provide a player for interview over the phone. Due to a change in training plan, this was no longer possible but the club's head of media told me he would obtain some exclusive quotes for me to use. It was a fairly routine piece with the conveniently named Dayle Grubb. However, picking up the newspaper the next day I was horrified to spot his name had been changed to Dean (I double checked my copy sent and I had it correct!) – the name of his older brother!

**Reflections:** Given my close working relationship with the club as **a lecturer**, I felt embarrassed and was concerned, if spotted, my own professional standards may be called into question. It is such a basic error – one I would immediately pull **my own students** up on. As a freelancer, I would normally be reluctant to ring a national newspaper desk to vent frustration at the risk of damaging a relationship, but I felt this error was sufficient for me to have just cause to flag. The desk apologised for the sub-editor's error and agreed to publish the story in full online with the correct name. This was the best possible outcome from a regrettable occurrence. To my relief, Forest Green never mentioned the mistake!

**Tuesday, January 1**

**Story:** Gary Gardner on his loan move from Villa to Birmingham

**What happened:** Birmingham City's PR department provided me with the chance to interview loan signing, Gary Gardner, at a community event. The complication here was that he had joined from Birmingham's fierce local rivals, Aston Villa. For further context, Gary's brother, Craig, had already made the same move and upon doing so, outed himself as a lifelong Birmingham fan – thus incurring the wrath of fans of Villa, whose academy he had come through.

I was informed before the interview that the player did not want to discuss Aston Villa. I, though, knew this was the only real story that would be of interest to a national audience, thus took a subtle line of questioning on the subject matter. Gardner did respond to this and, while relatively guarded in his responses, provided sufficient newsworthy material. However, given the sensitivities of the move – and the fact he still had a year left to run on his deal at his parent club Villa so could potentially be back playing for them the following season – even a fairly routine answer such as joining Birmingham was “an easy decision” and “no brainer” had the potential for provocative headlines and a reaction on social media.

**Reflections:** This was a challenging story to write given my Championship freelance work has tended to be for national tabloid newspapers, where the story needs to have some sort of 'edge' to make it newsworthy. No reporter, particularly a freelancer, wants to offer up a tepid line to the desk which may lead to the desk questioning whether they should use them, yet I also felt a sense of duty to my contact at the club who had granted the access to the player and provided a series of exclusive interviews throughout the previous season which had provided numerous other published stories.

After a number of unsuccessful attempts (largely due to a lack of demand for a Birmingham story that day), *The Sun* eventually carried a page lead piece with the intro: Gary Gardner admits becoming a Blues brother made crossing the Second-City divide much easier. I felt this top line coupled with the 'Blues brother' pun was sufficiently intriguing and newsworthy to satisfy [REDACTED] but it also avoided prompting the provocative headlines which might have jeopardised relations with the club.

**Thursday, 14 March:**

**Story:** Matt Doherty and Diogo Jota are made available for interview by Wolverhampton Wanderers ahead of their FA Cup quarter-final against Manchester United on the Saturday evening.

**What happened:** I am attending these interviews for [REDACTED], who want pieces with different players. Unfortunately, they are put up simultaneously, therefore cannot sit in both interviews but embargoed quotes are to be shared with the wider group afterwards – all common procedure. I am put in the group interviewing Jota, making the [REDACTED] feature for Friday straightforward. The [REDACTED] piece for Doherty was pencilled in for the Saturday matchday. After this game, there is an international break and Doherty is part of the Republic of Ireland squad who will be linking up with new

manager Mick McCarthy, who gave Doherty his debut when in charge at Wolves. Therefore, questions were also asked about Ireland matters as well as those surrounding his club. It was communicated to me upon leaving the interviews that these quotes would be saved until Monday, so I offered up a Wolves-related line for Saturday, steering clear of anything Ireland related – these quotes were yet to be emailed to me anyway. However, unbeknownst to me another journalist later came back to their half of the group who interviewed Doherty to say that he wanted to use the whole transcript on the Saturday. This communication did not reach me (one of the pitfalls of being split into different groups for transcriptions!) but there were still a significant amount of quotes seemingly unused and at this stage I still planned to file to [REDACTED] a secondary piece for Monday. Fortunately, one of the group flagged they thought the Irish Mirror had got hold of these quotes (perhaps from another freelancer present) and had run a piece. Now in possession of these additional quotes, I went through the transcript to see if there was a fresh line I could pursue but virtually the whole transcript had been used.

**Reflections:** For me, an ethical line would have been crossed had I offered up any of these 'old' quotes to [REDACTED] on Monday. Frustrating as it was, I took the view it was not worth risking my own reputation – or putting theirs on the line as a respected publication either. Therefore, I decided not to contact [REDACTED]. What did concern me, however, was that they might question my own editorial judgement as to why I had not originally offered up these Ireland-related quotes which, for an audience in Ireland, were more newsworthy than Doherty's views on Wolves – a club promoted to the Premier League that year and which would have a relatively small fanbase there compared with Liverpool or Manchester United. It was a timely reminder of how these kinds of round-table press conferences need micro-managing, particularly when you are a freelancer working on the patch less regularly than staff reporters who may have a tendency to look out for one another.

#### **Closing remarks, May 2019:**

After a particularly busy couple of years freelancing for the tabloids – largely on coverage of the Football League – my work suddenly dried up as 2018 drew to a close. This did not come as a huge surprise. The Reach PLC merger meant staff reporters from the Mirror, Star and Express were being pooled together and the Midlands patch was light on Premier League sides, meaning they now would need to dip into coverage of the Football League. The Sun no longer had the EFL supplement which had provided feature opportunities the previous season and their Saturday coverage of the EFL was being scaled back and largely brought in-house. Subsequently, from having multiple pieces published each weekend, between January 2 and the end of the season I had three stories published, prompting me to re-evaluate where I could position myself in the industry as a freelancer (I generally do not work weekends due to family commitments, discounting me from arguably the one remaining element of regular print freelance work – match reporting). Therefore, since June I have secured work with Perform Group, providing content for [REDACTED] – a leading global multi-platform, digital sports news agency. I will continue to pursue freelance newspaper work in the [REDACTED] area. The notion of conducting face-to-face interviews and covering events live in person was the very reason I entered the industry in 2006 – and nothing even now gives me greater satisfaction, so I would be reluctant to fully step back from this. However, moving forwards I anticipate this kind of digital work will take up an increasingly



significant portion of any time spent freelancing as there are more opportunities available. It has been a good challenge for me, stepping away from the comfort zone of football coverage to a scenario where a story from any sport could be handed to me. The requirements of the role – navigating a Content Management System, cropping my own photos, Search Engine Optimisation-friendly headlines etc – are sharpening up and enhancing my own practice. With my background rooted in newspapers (allied with online work for the likes of Premierleague.com and BBC Sport) I am acutely aware of the need to ‘futureproof’ myself as a digital/multimedia journalist. I believe this current work is one positive step towards achieving that.

### Themes:

**YELLOW:** Importance of building up trust with contacts/interviewees and not publishing views expressed off the record

**GREEN:** Consideration of self-censorship out of respect for interviewee’s reputation, but ultimately publishing what was on-the-record material

**BLUE:** The intro for a story is influenced by the need to strike a balance between satisfying the sports desk with a strong line while not alienating a club’s PR department

**GRAY:** Challenges of pack reporting simultaneous interviews, and negotiating transcription and embargo issues

**TURQUOISE:** Challenges as a freelancer to “future-proof” oneself by pursuing more digital lines of work

**TEAL:** Ethical importance of not using or repackaging old quotes as fresh ones

### Initial distillation:

A thread that emerges is of a freelancer constantly negotiating the tightrope of preserving his relationships with both the sports desks he works for and the PR departments of the clubs he covers. The establishing and maintenance of trust is regarded by the participant as central to this goal of keeping relationships intact, even if the sports desks and clubs pull in different directions. By admitting to a sense of “duty” towards his contacts in the PR department at a club, Papa arguably displays a form of journalistic heteronomy – a surrendering of his own independence to the gatekeepers who regulate access to players. This pragmatism is, however, arguably canny freelance journalism practice as it keeps sports clubs very much on Papa’s side, facilitating his job as a freelancer. The sense of the freelancer feeling both anxious and slightly on the fringe at times emerges, both in terms of job/work security, and the challenges of reporting alongside staff reporters.

## Appendix Five: Autoethnographic Data

### a) Marked-up Two-and-a-Half-Year Log (TAL)

#### Autoethnographic Log: August 2016 – March 2019

Entry date: 25 August, 2016

The nature of a sports journalist's interactions with the players and other people they cover is a key ethical consideration, and one that I have felt acutely at various points in my career as a sports journalist. From a clinical professional perspective (and this applies to journalists in other fields too), sources are a means to an end: a means of obtaining strong stories. It is a cliché that a journalist is only as good as their contacts book, and on this understanding contacts are effectively tools of the trade that one can use to get the job done. That is certainly how it has felt at times during my career, particularly when I was a full-time sports reporter with pressing daily deadlines to meet. With the rush of deadlines, it often seemed to me that contacts were instrumental – get stories, get quotes, get published. Even when contacts have been nurtured and good relationships built over a decent stretch of time (in so much as I've been able to freely converse with them and speak to them at any time), there has often been the sense that, again, this is primarily the case because I know I need to have contacts 'up my sleeve' for future stories. This instrumental use of sources – as a means to an end – is one I've considered for a long time, but I've also considered it from the other perspective – of many of them using the media as a means to an end, the end being to get a certain point or message across. One key issue is one of *distance*. What should be the distance that I, as a journalist, should keep between myself and my sources. Can – or rather, should – sources be allowed to become friends, or can this potentially lead to a me being compromised? As a young sports reporter, I think I struggled with this. If I got to know a player in some depth away from the pitch, I could then be quite defensive of that player should they come under scrutiny for, say, a poor performance. This, I think, is a particular issue for local/regional journalists covering one club in intense detail. I found I was at risk of becoming a 'fellow traveller' with the club – wanting them to do well, and wanting to be liked by players in order to feel on the inside. At the same time, however, I would feel what might be termed a pang of professional duty – and would then from time to time put the boot into certain players or coaches if performances or issues off the pitch weren't going well. This tendency to oscillate between wanting to be liked/one the inside versus retaining my sense of distance/being critical was one that was dominant throughout my early years as a sports reporter. It is an almost contradictory mindset, and I think the tension between distance-closeness is one that has never really gone away in my work as a sports journalist.

Social media has affected the nature of this relationship with players/sources. Below are a series of tweets and exchanges I had with a player (Mercer), coach (Hooper) and former press officer (Bayes) at Bath Rugby after the player was named club captain and I'd written at item about it on my blog. The exchange becomes informal, self-congratulatory, slightly jokey. I was deliberately using social media to try and promote myself as an informed and credible sports journalist, but looking back I wonder whether the interactions leave me looking too close and 'matey' with the club. Professional credibility could be undermined. Having said that, social media has heralded an increased informality in many interactions, so

this could be regarded as just an instance of that, reflecting neither positively or negatively on my standing as a sports journalist.



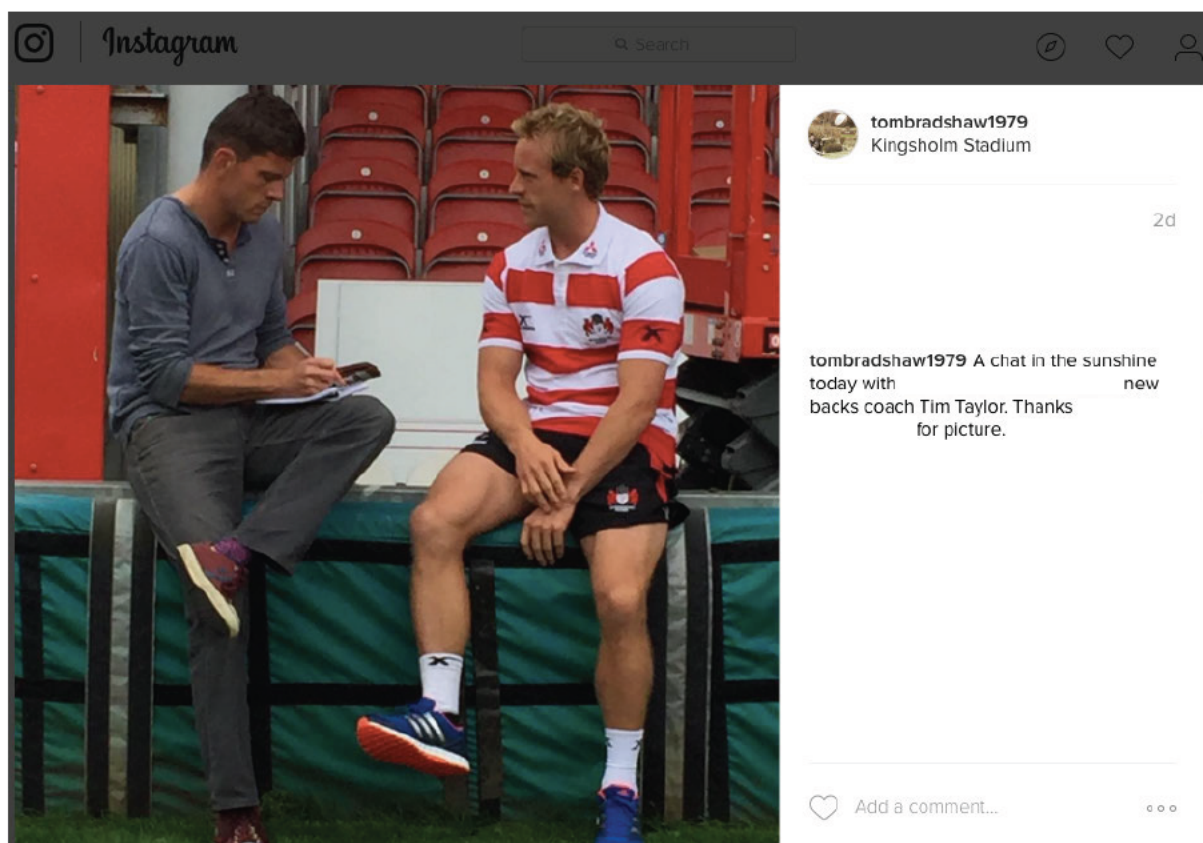






Entry date: 26 August, 2016

I took a photo for Twitter of a Gloucester player being interviewed by ITV after I had finished conducting my own interviews at Gloucester Rugby's pre-season media day on 22 August, 2016 and was walking back towards my car. While I was looking for an image that would capture the fact there had been a media day at Gloucester that I had attended and which I could then share on social media in order to promote my online brand, I also had another reason for potentially approaching the player. The player and his wife are friends with my then girlfriend, and I considered waiting to speak to the player in order to introduce myself and establish a 'personal' connection between him and me. Such connections can be useful in breaking down journalist-subject barriers, potentially making subjects more amenable to being interviewed in the future. But what are the ethical implications of this? Am I tarring my personal life with my professional life, or vice versa? Is my girlfriend potentially even relegated into the role of a pawn to help me strike up a relationship with a sportsman? I did ponder some of these thoughts as I observed the interview and walked on, feeling slightly uncomfortable at the idea of imposing upon the player in such a manner. Reflecting now, I think an introduction to the player in a natural social setting would be the more legitimate way of developing a relationship with him that could potentially be useful to me journalistically in the future.



Following the media day, I was sent an email by the intern at Gloucester's media department – an intern who is one of my students who is about to enter his third year. He sent me two photos of me carrying out interviews. I liked this one (above), as I felt it captured two things; firstly, that I was in control of the interview but relaxed and, secondly, that my subject was at ease – preconditions, generally, for a successful interview. With the



new season about to start, it also occurred to me that it would do my 'online brand' no harm if I published a photo of me at work ahead of the new season, so, having gained my student's permission, I distributed the image on my Instagram account with the caption above. Should such a caption contain the handle for the club (@officialgloucesterrugby) or is that again a bit too 'cosy'. Am I in danger of appearing like a club lackey?

**Entry date: 25 August, 2016**

Due to commitments in London, I was unable to attend a press conference in Bath. The press conference was a pre-season media day and an opportunity to interview new players and coaches. I asked that audio files from the press conference interviews be sent to me by a former colleague/friend. Is this just a sensible use of time, or unethical corner-cutting? Anybody I pitch the stories to as a freelancer would assume I had been at the media session in person i.e. I wouldn't tell an editor that I hadn't been there in person. Is there an element of deception here? The fact I am posing this question at all maybe suggests there is.

**Entry date: September 5, 2016**

I've been reading through articles that I've had published over the past fortnight as I prepare to invoice clients, and one particular piece of wording struck me as I was reading through an article in the 28 August edition of *The Rugby Paper*. The point that occurred to me was how self-censorship can occur through the use of euphemism. This thought was triggered by reading the following sentence that I'd written: "█████ finished ninth in the Premiership last season, prompting the club to part ways with head coach ██████." The euphemism here is "part ways". ██████ was sacked by the club mid-way through a four-year contract, yet I have chosen a softer wording. Did I think at the time of writing that I was softening the wording in connection with ██████ dismissal? Thinking back, I think I did hesitate briefly over the phraseology. I wrote those words after a brief consideration of what the 'right' wording would be, but it's only now that it strikes me how euphemistic they are. What are the 'right' words to select in this situation? Why did I choose those words? Why didn't I simply say "sacked" or "dismissed"? While at the time of writing the article I didn't dwell on this word selection for too long – at least on a conscious level – I think now that I was potentially doing it for the sake of not jeopardizing future relations with ██████. ██████ is a coach who I have known and interviewed for approximately five years, and on occasions I have interviewed him week in, week out. We are connected on LinkedIn and it is likely that a coach of his background and experience will, at some point, obtain a coaching position that will once again bring us into contact. By referring to the end of his tenure at ██████ as a "parting of the ways" I believe, in hindsight, that it was done out of a semi-unconscious desire to not annoy him or jeopardise my future dealings with him. *The Rugby Paper* is a well-read publication within the game, and ██████ is more than likely to be aware of its content. By avoiding the use of the word "sacked", I am potentially not alienating a contact I may well need to be on good terms with in the future. This is a small point and maybe even an irrational one – in x number of months or years' time, will ██████ really remember a) the article; b) that it was me who wrote the article; and c) the particular choice of phraseology? No, he almost certainly won't. But it's interesting to reflect that on such an apparently small, trivial matter as this word selection that I am trimming my vocabulary in certain ways; my inner censor appears to be at work.

Writing this entry – which I think could be referred to as being about self-censorship through euphemism – has also prompted me to think of another piece I recently wrote for *The Rugby Paper*, in which I again referred to a coach's sacking in euphemistic terms. In a pre-season piece about [redacted] strategy for the forthcoming season I referred to a sacked coach, [redacted], as having simply "left" the club. In another (unpublished) version of the piece that was pitched to *The Times*, I referred to [redacted] services having been "dispensed with". While I suspect that [redacted] does not know me by name or face – or at least certainly not in the way that [redacted] does – I believe that on reflection a similar semi-unconscious desire not to alienate or ruffle the feathers of a coach/future contact was at play here. This seems to be tantamount to a pattern of semi-conscious self-censorship. These reflections on my choice of wording in pieces relating to sacked coaches do make me think that I have been a little 'soft' or 'gutless' and will certainly bring the issue of phraseology more to the forefront of my mind when I work on similar stories in the future, where I think I am now more likely to be more direct and non-euphemistic.

**Entry date: 13 September, 2016**

During last week, I was contacted by *The Times* on Tuesday and asked if I could provide a match report for them on the match between Worcester and Gloucester on Friday, September 9. As this was a Friday evening match, it would require the match report to be filed to the newspaper within seconds of the final whistle in order for the report to be included in the early editions of the paper, as well as online. I was uncertain and uneasy about whether to accept the order because I was already booked into cover the match as a co-commentator for BBC Hereford and Worcester/Online, and to provide a detailed colour piece of the game for Sunday's *The Rugby Paper*. I had never covered a Friday match before for both radio and a newspaper/website that required 'on-the-whistle' copy, and I felt torn. I wanted to say 'yes' to *The Times* because I had been unsuccessful in securing any commissions for the previous weekend's matches (the opening weekend of the season) and I was anxious to get back in the groove of published match reporting. This is because as a freelancer I want my name to stay 'out there' so that my brand/presence does not drop off the radar. Similarly, saying 'no' to *The Times* could, I feared, prompt me to drop down the pecking order of freelancers that the organization uses. So there was an element of fear that I could harm my freelance credentials by turning down a commission so early in the season. But, on the other hand, I was worried that if I agreed to the commission then I would be biting off more than I could chew, and this could lead to a very stressful evening which would compromise the quality of my work, both on air and in print.

This tension partly arises through me being a self-consciously multimedia freelance journalist – I like to market myself as a sports journalist who works 'in print, on air, online'. But this poses problems when requests for match coverage come in for more than one medium, as was the case for Friday night. Can I maintain the quality of my work if I'm 'spinning plates' and simultaneously trying to perform on more than one medium?

Having spoken to a fellow freelance sports journalist about my predicament, I decided I would feel ethically more comfortable if I flagged up to *The Times* that, while I wanted to take their commission, I was already booked in with the BBC. One option would have been

to simply say ‘Yes, I can cover it’ to *The Times* rather than sowing a doubt in their minds that my copy might be below-quality due to my radio work. But I felt it would be more professional if I was honest with them. This was the subsequent exchange that I had with the sportsdesk. The most interesting insight was that *The Times* were basically unconcerned about what else I was doing – just as long as they got their “decent copy”.

Despite me saying in an email that I was “totally confident” in the quality of copy that *The Times* would get from me, a part of me remained anxious that I had too much work. What if *The Times* wanted an 800-word piece on top of their usual statistics, which are onerous to compile? This caused me some apprehension and sleeplessness that night, triggered by some self-doubts over my ability to multi-task to such a tight deadline.

The following day, I struck on the idea of seeing whether I could bring one of my undergraduate Sports Journalism students along with me to the match. The student would record the statistics and team changes (for both *The Times* and *The Rugby Paper*) while I would be free to concentrate on the main body of the match report while also co-commentating on the radio. I checked with the media manager at Worcester Warriors whether he would be happy for me to do that, and when he said he was I contacted a student who was about to start his final year at the University of Gloucestershire. He expressed his enthusiasm and willingness to get involved. While I had confidence in the student, this raised potential ethical questions. What would *The Times* think if they knew I was effectively sub-contracting part of the work to a student? I quickly overcame any scruples about this, given the nature of my exchange with *The Times’* sportsdesk earlier in the week. As long as they got their copy they’d be happy, regardless of the details of how it was put together. But it made me think of the resourcefulness that’s perhaps required in order to be a freelancer who is reluctant to turn down commissions.

On the evening of the match itself, I had an underlying sense of anxiety. I was able to eat the pre-match meal for the media, but it was a bit of a struggle. Was I going to be able to pull it off, or would things unravel during the final 10 minutes as the game got closer to the final whistle? Would the student fulfil the brief I’d given him? Would the student be able to email me the statistics on the final whistle without losing internet connection? This sense of anxiety was eased considerably when I phoned into speak to the sportsdesk and find out what word count I was working to. At this point, I was informed that the desk had that day taken the decision not to ask their correspondents to provide the team details and statistics on top of the main report; they would compile the stats back in the office and just leave me and the other match reporters to concentrate on the report proper. This was unexpected and a big relief.

During half time, I had a call from the sportsdesk. I was asked whether I’d seen footage that suggested that one of the tries that had been scored in the first half was the result of a forward pass. I said I hadn’t and that the big screen at the ground was broken, so no replays were being shown at the ground. The editor told me that he had seen the footage and it was “clear” that there had been a forward pass. He said *The Times* had done some pieces over the previous week that had focused on how referees were seemingly letting forward passes go unpunished, to the detriment of the game. “If you mention that high up your piece I’ll be happy,” said the editor. This was potentially ethically contentious, because I was

relying on the testimony of another for a match report that I was supposedly the first-hand witness to. It reminded me of how *The Times* had done exactly the same thing towards the end of the previous season, where they had phoned me up towards the end of the match and told me that they'd seen social media/TV stills that showed two acts of eye gouging. Could I work that high up the piece and also ask questions about it in the post-match press conference, a duty sports editor had asked. This had been even more ethically problematic, because eye-gouging is an abhorrent practice and carries very lengthy bans. Back then, I could have refused to ask questions on the basis of me not having seen the footage myself. I could be defaming players. But the consequence would probably have been that I wouldn't have been asked to work for *The Times* again. So I did work in a tentative line about eye gouging (although not as high up the piece as the editor suggested) and pursued that line of questioning in the press conference. Looking back, that was a match where I'd felt like a true hack – a hired hand who was basically doing the outlet's bidding. But my conscience was salvaged by me reminding myself that gouging was an issue in the sport and that it needed to remain under the spotlight. However, both events left me feeling like I had little moral autonomy as a freelancer and this made me feel ethically uneasy. (In the end, *The Times* focused on the forward pass controversy: "'Try reignites furore over forward passes'" is how they presented the piece for the early edition, and for their online piece and later editions they used quotes that I had obtained from the Gloucester director of rugby about the 'forward pass' incident – see below).



Largely due to the dilemma about whether to take on *The Times'* commission and the multiple, different-platform deadlines I was working to, my work covering the Worcester-Gloucester match has also posed a question about what I am first and foremost as a sports journalist. Am I a commentator (broadcaster) or am I writer? And if I am a writer, am I – or do I regard myself – as primarily a writer for online or for print? And is how I see myself in this regard actually what I am? My instinctive answer is that I see myself as all of them, and that I don't see any contradictions in this. This ties in with the notion of journalistic convergence and the idea that, if you want to have a future as a sports journalist, certainly as a freelancer, then you can't pigeon-hole yourself as being one type of journalist. One way to put it is that, to a greater or lesser extent, we are all multimedia journalists now. To just try and operate on and work for one platform is to limit one's professional possibilities. The skills required are, for the most part, overlapping, although there are practical/technical issues to become familiar with when broadcasting or using digital platforms, although they tend to no longer be 'issues' once they have been used several times. By overlapping, I mean: the ability to tell a story with accuracy and colour; the ability to speak/write with authority and poise; the ability to identify news-worthy angles; the ability to offer insight, analysis and context in a clear way. So there is no need for a false dichotomy or split. This probably elaborates on the phrase I have on my email signature: "In print | On air | Online" – a signature intended to convey the fact I am a multimedia sports journalist who does not

prioritise one platform or 'identity' over another. To market myself to potential commissioning editors, I believe this versatility is important – although versatility is perhaps an overstatement, as it's what all sports journalists should probably be offering, or at least the image/brand they should be trying to cultivate.

**Entry date – 13 September, 2016**

On Sunday morning (September 11) I received a Facebook friend request from the media manager at a Premiership rugby club. This made me feel uneasy about breaching the line between professional/personal. While I would unhesitatingly connect with such a person on LinkedIn and even Twitter, which in journalistic circles has a heavy professional element, I initially felt Facebook was too personal. This perhaps reflects my own use and approach to Facebook rather than any hard and fast rules about the uses to which Facebook is put. Moreover, I might have to publish/say critical things about the club in the future, and would 'friendships' such as this make me more likely to 'hold back' or self-censor. However, while I had these reservations, I also considered how it would appear to the media manager if I ignored the request or turned it down. Could this appear as a snub, and compromise my future dealings with him and the club? In the end, I felt it all boiled down to ensuring the smoothest relationship between me and the club, so after about five minutes' consideration I accepted the request. But this issue reflects the grey area between the professional and the personal that digital era with its multi-purpose social media platforms throws up.

**Entry date: October 8, 2016**

I was covering last night's game for a print title, but previewed the game using a range of digital platforms: Vine, Instagram and Snapchat, with the Snapchat video then uploaded to my Twitter feed. While I was paid for the print work but not for the digital work, I regard them of similar importance. These digital previews won't earn me any money directly; they were done to alert my social media followers (including both supporters and fellow journalists) to the fact I was at the game. But such updates are an important part of what I do – the building and maintenance of a brand that tries to say "I'm diverse, I'm relevant, I can use the latest technology to reach a young audience". If I just relied on my activity as a print writer then I feel I run the risk of anonymity – I need to be more visible and active. My identity needs to straddle the online and offline.

"Hit my hand, bro" Scrum-half #targetpractice for Bath ahead of #Avivaprem match with #SaleSharks



"Hit my hand, bro" Scrum-half #targetpractice for Bath ahead of...

Vine by Tom Bradshaw

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**tombradshaw1979**  
Bath Rugby Ground - The Rec

13 likes 3w

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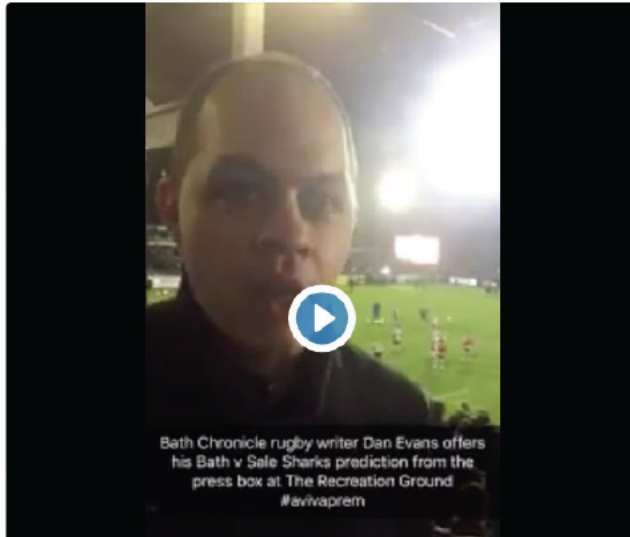




Tom Bradshaw  
@TomBradshaw1979

Predictions for  
in [#AvivaPrem](#) from

rugby guru



**Entry date: 28 October 2016**

Balancing one's inside knowledge with what is actually published/broadcast was posed by this situation. I was made aware of a Premiership club player's career-ending injury through a mutual friend two weeks before a press release was issued by the club. But rather than writing a piece about it, I respected the confidence (even though it wasn't explicitly stated by my friend that it was confidential). But this was as much about maintaining my friendship as sitting on a story. To have published a piece about this would have probably ruined a friendship. But would the situation have been different if it had been a current international who was being forced to retire, rather than a 34-year-old club player? Would I have felt conflicted? I believe so – because the journalist core in me always wants to get the big story out there and be the first with it. This is a commendable professional drive and all good journalists need it, but it needs to be tempered, otherwise the drive to get an exclusive becomes the altar on which all sorts of (far more) important things can become sacrificed.

**Entry dates: December 2016 and early January 2017**

Access to Anthony Watson for a profile piece was exceedingly difficult, with “club and country” acting in a rather possessive and terrain-protecting manner. This was in contrast with a similar profile piece two years earlier, where access was much more relaxed, with his club, Bath, happy for me to interview him on ‘club time’. This reflects what could be termed a ‘footballisation’ of access, with rugby seemingly going down the route of football and its jealously guarded players. The temptation here was to somehow try to circumvent the process because the work was lucrative, but in the end it was just patience and

perseverance through the official media relations channels that eventually resulted in the interview.

**Entry date: 30 July 2017**

I attended a party for the wife of a former Premiership player. A number of current and former Premiership players were there. Two players had a look of 'I recognize this man, but can't place him' about them until I was properly introduced, and there was a general air with some of them of 'how much can I say in front of this guy?' Others were very relaxed and open. One former player, who is now a coach, had to be a bit wary because of the unconfirmed story of a player's impending departure for another club. I felt slightly awkward for most of the event. Part of me – the news hound element – was always thinking about potential stories, so the news radar was always twitching. However, the other element was emphasizing the need to treat this as a purely social gathering. I took the approach that everything was off the record as it was a social event organized by friends, but it would be dishonest to say a part of me didn't also view it as a potential story-gathering opportunity.

**Entry date: 26 August 2017**

██████████ v ██████████ – pre-season match

The welcome letter for the media that I collected at the ground along with my media accreditation contained a new clause relating to questions about injuries that arguably attempted to muffle the media. It stated, in essence, that during post-match press conferences the coaches and players would not answer questions about injuries. Prima facie, it seemed like an attempt to shut down legitimate questions. A conversation with the media manager after the match resulted in him saying to a local reporter that "if you send an email with queries on Monday, we'll get back to you with the details when we have them." This marked a shift in information control towards the club.

I felt I needed to raise this with the Rugby Writers' Club, of which I am a member. Below is the email to Alex Lowe, Sarah Mockford and Hugh Godwin of the Rugby Writers' Club on August 25, 2017, along with the email I'd just sent to ██████████'s media department:

*Hi guys,*

*Just thought I'd bring to the Rugby Writers' Club's attention something that caught my eye at ██████████ during a pre-season friendly.*

*The club is saying that journalists can't ask coaches about injuries in post-match pressers. I've attached a photo of the relevant section from the press pack.*

*It would seem, on the face of it, to be an attempt to control the media, and - while not wishing to be overly dramatic - it could result in a number of flashpoint over the coming*

season.

I've just sent an email to the [REDACTED] media department, requesting a justification - see below.

Best wishes,

Tom

Tom Bradshaw

Begin forwarded message:

**From:** Tom Bradshaw

**Subject:** Injury questions

**Date:** 25 August 2017 at 11:21:55 BST

**To:** [REDACTED]

Hi guys,

Hope everything's going well ahead of the start of the Premiership next weekend.

I just wanted to clarify something ahead of the start of the new season relating to post-match questions about injuries.

Before the [REDACTED] friendly, I saw the point on the Media Welcome sheet about coaches being unable to answer post-match questions relating to injuries due to the need for further medical assessment to be carried out. I just wanted a bit more clarification on this, because it would seem to potentially stifle what would seem to be legitimate questions in certain circumstances (e.g. heaven forbid, [REDACTED] suffering a suspected break ahead of an England camp and the media wanting to ask questions about it).

While I understand that some injuries quite clearly require further medical assessment before an accurate diagnosis can be made, others are more straightforward and I can't really see the justification for the media being forbidden to ask questions about injuries post-match, and having to wait until the Monday to direct questions to the media department.

I hope you don't think I'm being difficult: I'm just seeking a bit of clarification around the reasoning behind this so that I know where I and the rest of the media stand come the new season.

Cheers,

Tom

Tom Bradshaw

I then had responses directly from both the club and from members of the Rugby Writers' Club. The club's media department assured me that the measure was intended only to prevent post-match interviews from turning into state-of-the-squad injury updates, rather than stifling questions about injuries that arose during the specific match. Members of the RWC committee raised the matter with the club and were given a similar assurance.

***End-of-season reflection on the issue, 15 August 2018:***

During the 2017-18 season, I encountered no issues with the club regarding enquiries about injuries following this exchange.

The response from the Rugby Writers' Club was swift and effective, and underscored the relevance of having such a body. A question that arises is whether the policing of rugby journalism/relationships with clubs in this manner serves as a kind of self-regulatory process, albeit with the RWC lobbying to protect rugby journalists' interests in the face of what might be perceived as potential restrictions imposed by clubs. By encouraging individual journalists to flag up issues, and by responding to them, it feels to me that the RWC arguably fosters a climate in which issues around the free flow of information in sports journalism can be fostered. This is positive for ethical standards within the industry, encouraging as it does reflections on working practices. A question that arises is whether other sports journalism clubs – such as the Football Writers' Association – function in a similar manner, and whether the existence of such autonomous organisations helps promote thoughtful/ethical/reflective sports journalism. And, if so, whether they to some degree obviate the need for a recognised sports journalism code of conduct, or whether they suggest the need for one.

**Entry date: 24 August, 2017**

*The Times*, for whom I write, has announced a media "partnership" with Premiership Rugby. This makes me uneasy. How can you partner an organization you're supposed to be holding to account in the course of your work? There is inevitable conflict. Will there be the undermining of independence; will journalists 'sit' on stories as a consequence? Or does it facilitate better journalism/access? Is it a modern 'necessary evil'? Or is there nothing 'evil' about it at all just a reflection of sports journalism in a capitalist society where legacy media companies are seeking ways and partnerships to remain viable? The most telling quote, I feel, is the final one from Alex Butler, the sports editor of *The Sunday Times*: "This agreement will help our journalists provide the very best coverage and analysis." In what way? Why and how? Is coverage by news organisations without such an agreement somehow impoverished?

*Statement: Premiership Rugby can today confirm a new three year partnership with The Times and The Sunday Times.*

*“This is an important partnership for both organisations and we know it will be mutually beneficial,” said Premiership Rugby’s Head of Partnerships, Paul Sherrell. “Aviva Premiership Rugby is in great health after a record breaking season when we saw a rise in match attendances, live TV audiences, tries and points we are ready to move to the next stage of our development and partners like The Times and The Sunday Times will be crucial in that journey.”*

*There is clear synergy between the Premiership Rugby and The Times and The Sunday Times audience. The partnership will bring value to both their customers in numerous ways throughout the season; The Times and The Sunday Times will use its world class sports journalists and exposure to provide expert analysis and video content for fans and readers and papers will be distributed at big games. Subscribers of The Times and The Sunday Times will also have access to exclusive ticket offers and events. talksSPORT will broadcast key matches.*

*Jo Coughlin, Head of Partnerships for The Times and The Sunday Times, said: “This strategic partnership is very important for us and we are excited to begin this three year relationship with Premiership Rugby. The partnership will help us to enhance our credentials as the number one paper for rugby and will engage with our rugby enthusiast readers and subscribers. We believe this partnership can deliver on key objectives for both brands, allowing us both to deepen engagement and build customer base. ”*

*Alex Butler, sports editor of The Sunday Times, said: “We are delighted to be in partnership with Premiership Rugby. The sport is enormously important to our readers who demand high standards from our experienced team of rugby writers. This agreement will help our journalists provide the very best coverage and analysis.”*

## Entry date: 24 November, 2017

Matt Williams

Fri 11/24/2017, 3:47 PM

BRADSHAW, Tom

👤 Reply all

You forwarded this message on 11/24/2017 5:34 PM

Hi Tom,

Hope you're well?

Wondered if you'd be interested in working together with a couple of the guys from Saracens? We have time with Brad Barritt and Alex Goode on Tuesday courtesy of Optimum Nutrition and wondered if you'd be interested in asking them some questions?

Happy to chat through working on any angles but we'd look to support with an Optimum Nutrition credit and image if possible?

Let me know if you want to chat it through today.

Thanks,  
Matt







Approaches such as the one above from the communications teams of brands, or PR agencies working on their behalf, are becoming increasingly common. The deal is effectively a *quid pro quo* of “You can have access to an elite player, as long as you mention x brand in the course of the coverage”. The mention might be a credit or logo at the end of the piece, or a photo (as above), or might be a requirement that you ask a question about the brand in question. From the perspective of independence and integrity, this is questionable. At worst you as a journalist are surrendering your objectivity and instead becoming a mouthpiece for a commercial interest; your pen (or computer) is transformed into a promotional tool for brand/product x. The flow of information from you as a sports journalist is compromised by you becoming complicit in a brand’s commercial objectives. From a more practical and pragmatic perspective, however, it is perhaps just a way to secure access to players who are increasingly hidden by their clubs anyway. To retain one’s independence, there is the option of ‘playing along’ with the brand and then not complying with their requirement to include a mention of the brand, but then that involves a level of deviousness towards the PR teams that have facilitated access. The other option is not to pursue the invitation at all for the sake of retaining one’s independence, which is what I did in this case. However, I am conscious that I did not respond to this invitation as I was already busy. As a freelance, I could foresee circumstances where I was having a bit of a quiet patch, and as such might pursue such an invitation. More generally, this issue boils down to: at what price player access? It also highlights how the professionalization and attendant commercialization of rugby affects the nature of access to sports stars – who could be perceived as being used as commodities – access to whom is effectively paid for by journalists who agree to promote x brand in the course of their coverage of the player. This whole process is not directly a form of restriction on free speech but it is potentially a dilution of it insofar as access to an



interviewee is granted conditionally. The PR person arranging the interview makes certain stipulations with regard to content, perhaps in a manner that is analogous to the requirements that a censor could make. This *conditionality* is an important consideration when reflecting on the changing nature of player access and the integrity of subsequent sports media content.

### Entry date: 25 February 2018

This is a continuation of the issue raised in the previous log entry. It can, again, effectively be distilled to the question of whether the mentioning of a brand is a price that can be justified in order to gain interview access. There are two differences here, however, from the 24 November 2017 example. The first is that the requirement here was for a poker brand to be mentioned, and thereby effectively that poker itself – to some a questionable pastime – be promoted. The second is that I did take up the opportunity to do the interview and wrote two pieces about it: one for a newspaper, the other for my blog. The piece for the newspaper that I submitted contained a passing reference to the poker brand, but the whole piece was cut back by the editor and mention to it removed. Parts of the exchange with the PR representative are contained below along with the link to the blog article.

 Sebastian Floyd  
Tue 1/23, 2:17 PM   

Hi there,

Hope you're well.

We have an interview opportunity for 10-15 minutes at 6pm this coming Thursday (25<sup>th</sup> Jan) with former Gloucester rugby player James Simpson Daniel and I wondered whether this would be something of interest?


James – who played over 250 times for Gloucester and won 10 caps for England – is in London taking part in the PokerStars Poker Festival at the Hippodrome Casino in Leicester Square.

James will be available to talk about any topics pertaining to Gloucester rugby, as well as the upcoming Six Nations. However, we would politely ask for at least one question to be related to James' activity with PokerStars.

Please let me know if you would like any further information.





Thanks,  
**Seb**

**Sebastian Floyd** | Account Executive

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MARKETING GROUP

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W [www.pitch.co.uk](http://www.pitch.co.uk)

Sebastian Floyd

Wed 1/24, 9:39 AM



Thanks for your email Tom – absolutely! I've put you down at 6PM.

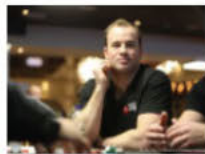
If I could get your phone number please and James will ring you at 6, if that works?

Also, would it be at all possible to send over a list of topics that you were planning on covering during the interview please? James has asked so that he can fully prepare for the interview.

Many thanks,

Seb

...



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Hi Tom,

Hope the interview went well last week!

Please find a picture of James attached, it would be great if you were able to include it in your piece.

Also, if you could also include the below tagline, that would be fantastic.

***James Simpson Daniel was playing at the PokerStars Festival London. Join the world's most popular online poker sites at PokerStars and visit [BetStars News](#) for a full Six Nations preview.***

Would you be able to give an indication of when your piece will be going live?

Many thanks,

Seb

...



Sebastian Floyd

Wed 2/7, 10:05 AM

Hi Tom,

Hope all's well.

Do you know when the James Simpson Daniel piece will be going up on site?

Many thanks,

Seb

...



BRADSHAW, Tom

Wed 2/7, 5:23 PM



5 attachments (20 KB) Download all Save all to OneDrive - University of Gloucestershire

Hi Seb

Apologies for the delay in getting back to you.

I've now filed a piece with The Rugby Paper which they may use this weekend or next, although as a freelancer they can obviously choose what they do with it. Once they've published it, I'll also put something up on my blog.

Best wishes

Tom

...

 BRADSHAW, Tom  
Thu 2/22, 10:18 AM  
Sebastian Floyd

  Reply all | 

Sent Items

Hi **Seb**,

The Rugby Paper did run a short piece last Sunday but it was cut right back due to Ollie Thorley, the Gloucester winger, unfortunately suffering a serious shoulder injury the day before. I'd structured the piece around James talking about Thorley's development, so it was a shame about the timing. I've reworked something for my blog and posted it below.

Best wishes

Tom

<https://tombradshawrugby.blogspot.co.uk/2018/02/james-simpson-daniel-johan-ackermann.html>



James Simpson-Daniel: Johan Ackermann has turned Gloucester pack around

[tombradshawrugby.blogspot.co.uk](https://tombradshawrugby.blogspot.co.uk)

James Simpson-Daniel believes European Champions Cup rugby next season is within Gloucester's reach - but claims a top-four finish is likely...

Blog article: <http://tombradshawrugby.blogspot.co.uk/2018/02/james-simpson-daniel-johan-ackermann.html>



One element to reflect on was the PR executive's request that I submit an outline of the questions I intended to ask. Ethically, this would appear to breach what some would regard as an important principle of journalism, which is not to tip-off your interviewee about the questions you're going to ask (or at least not all of them). However, I'm comfortable providing a broad outline of the areas I want to ask questions about when I'm doing an interview with a subject about relatively 'soft' issues, as it simply gives them time to reflect on their answers, which might indeed turn out to be more detailed and interesting if they've had time to consider their response. However, I would not do this as a matter of course, and always think about the implications of giving an interviewee a 'heads up' in each case where I'm asked to. If I was conducting an interview about 'harder' news topics, such as doping or corruption, then I would be less inclined to do so, particularly if someone were responding to allegations. On the other hand, in my experience if there is a particularly delicate or serious issue that requires a response, then sometimes the only way to get such a response is to email the person/organisation in question with a summary of the issue you want a response to; a method which by definition gives the subject time to consider their response.

It's also worth noting that in this case it was simply *convenient* for me to take up the interview opportunity. I was busy with various pieces of work but was keen to do a piece on

the club in question, and having a brand PR arrange the interview for me was a useful piece of admin that was taken care of. However, there is a nagging sense that my journalistic independence is – however minutely – compromised by such a process, and that it is a slippery slope. If this becomes the norm in terms of how to procure and conduct interviews, then the currency of sports media content is arguably weakened/contaminated.

Interestingly, when I discussed the interview opportunity offer with another reporter, he said he had received it too but had ignored it, saying that he knew the interviewee sufficiently well that he did not need to go through such an agency but could just phone him directly. This is the ideal – unfettered, direct content with a contact with whom you have a sufficiently good and trusting relationship that they pick up the phone to you. This eliminates the issues of dilution, semi-censorship, contamination and conditionality referred to above.

### **Entry date: 27 April 2018 – the nature of sports journalism embargoes**

Relevant artefact: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/jason-woodward-inspires-gloucester-to-challenge-cup-semi-final-win-7zhmjh2mm>

The issue of ‘sitting on stories’ is sometimes illustrated through the self-imposed, mutually-agreed embargoes that sports journalists agree to observe following interviews. These are agreements to refrain from publishing quotes from a certain player/coach – or to refrain from writing about a certain story or angle – until a later date. Typically, such embargoes might be agreed following a Saturday match, where a certain interview might be “held back” for use in Monday’s newspapers. In such a case, the quotes from the Saturday interview would be embargoed until 10/10.30pm on the Sunday evening, thus enabling websites to publish them late on a Sunday night but for Monday morning’s newspaper titles not to be undermined. The thinking behind the process is that sports reporters are able to get more bites of the cherry out of a match/assignment, and that they collectively preserve their reputations by not being out-scooped by another reporter.

Embargoes would seem to be a form of self-policing and a case of journalism through ‘gentleman’s agreement’. One ethical issue is about the wilful breaking of such an agreed embargo by a journalist, who thereby breaks ranks and breaches the unwritten rule of embargo observance.

However, I sometimes wonder whether there is another ethical dimension around embargoing. Does embargoing have a potentially distorting effect on the flow of information; whether it is a form of – if not self-censorship – then at least artificial postponement that in some sense blocks the flow of sports news to the detriment of the reader/audiences? In what way is it in the public’s interest that such embargoing occurs? If journalism is about the accurate and timely distribution of information, then self-imposed embargoes would seem to be *prima facie* a corruption of that, all for the sake of journalistic self-protection. This could especially be the case if it is one journalist pushing – and ultimately persuading others to agree to – the imposition of an embargo which is not necessarily in the interests of the other journalists present.

Friday's match that I covered for *The Times* and *The Rugby Paper* – a European semi-final between Gloucester and Newcastle – prompted reflections on this issue. The stand-out player and man of the match was Jason Woodward, and a particular member of the media who was working for a Sunday title was keen for the post-match quotes from Woodward to be embargoed until 10.30pm on Saturday/Sunday morning, so that he could have a “fresh” story for Sunday. Following the interview with Woodward, this particular journalist was vocal and assertive in appealing for the Woodward interview to be embargoed. “So we’re all agreed that Woodward is embargoed for Sunday?” and other assertive statements were made. Other journalists gave their agreement but not necessarily enthusiastically. I was content to go along with it as I had a commission for a Sunday paper as well as a Saturday one so this gave me a guaranteed line that I knew wasn’t going to appear before Sunday. So, from a self-interested perspective it worked for me. But I felt uneasy at the manner in which one journalist’s will/wishes had effectively prevailed, determining the general flow of information.

**Entry date: 16 May, 2018**

Yesterday I attended an event at Gloucester Rugby where the club announced a re-branding and a new logo. I had received an invitation to it a month earlier, describing the event as a “VIP” one and by invitation-only. There were drinks, canapes and the chance for media interviews at the end of the presentation and mingling. During the course of the event, the CEO of the club, Stephen Vaughan, gave a presentation in which he thanked “stakeholders” in the club, including the media. At the end of the event, the club issued members of the media with a bag of club-branded items that carried the club’s new logo, the contents of which are shown in the image below (including even a lapel badge):



The obvious question that arises is the extent to which journalistic independence is potentially compromised by the club's approach to the media; or, rather, by journalists' response to this corporate communications strategy by the club. Both through the gist of the CEO's presentation and the 'gift' bag, there is an attempt by the club for members of the media to start seeing themselves, to some extent, as part of the club, rather than as separate from it. To bring the journalists into the inside, rather than to have them on the outside. Anticipating a possible backlash to the modern rebranding, it would make PR sense for the club to have journalists on their side in the course of the rebranding announcement. To my mind, it was important to retain independence by still asking challenging questions of the various senior members of the club who were put up for interview. This I did by asking the owner about the club's financial model and its sustainability, rather than only focusing

on the rebrand. Primarily, it was vital to be on one's toes and to be alive to the possibility of a form of professional seduction by the blend of prosecco, canapes and gifts.

**Entry date: 30 July 2018 - Further reflection on May 15 event at Gloucester Rugby**

Since the Gloucester rebranding event referred to in the previous entry, I have published two stories that are based around quotes I gathered at the press conference, one of which



was more than a month after the event (see cutting above). However, re-reading *Sports Journalism: A Multimedia Primer* by Rob Steen, the sportswriter and academic, has prompted me to think about the equity of “sitting on” quotes for another day i.e. using them a number of weeks, even months, after they have been delivered by the person one has interviewed. Steen writes: “Given the choice, leading sportspeople would always prefer to be interviewed on the air. That way, what they say cannot so easily be filtered or edited, or left to stew for a few days, or longer, to be reheated for another time, another context” (2014: 43).

The practice of ‘carving up’ an interview - that is, deciding (either in your own mind, or in discussion with other journalists) what quotes you will run immediately and which ones will be held back – is commonplace in industry, as captured in an earlier reflection. However, there are instances in the course of my career where I have used quotes a number of months after I obtained them. In one story for the *Daily Express*, I recall using some quotes I had left over from an interview in the winter for a preview of a European cup final. Is the non-contemporaneous use of quotes in this manner fair on a) the interviewee; and b) the audience? It could be contended that the interviewee has a reasonable expectation that the quotations (s)he is giving will be used promptly, while the audience has a reasonable expectation that the quotes they are reading have been recently sourced. But if the quotes are germane to the point of the article, why shouldn’t they be used without qualification? The issue, on reflection, is probably one that boils down to issues of context and intent. As Steen suggests, if the quotes are being used out of context and/or with the intention to stir up/add to a debate that hadn’t occurred at the time of the interview, then that is a deliberate act of twisting by the reporter. Otherwise, there is no ethical issue.

### **Entry date: 15 August 2018**

On August 9, I attended a pre-season media day at ██████████ and interviewed a number of players ahead of the forthcoming season. One of them, ██████████, who I had got to know well over the course of the past decade, spoke to me immediately after I had turned off the microphone to give me – unrequested – a number of less than complimentary opinions about how his former club ██████████ was being run. In particular, he referred to how non-disclosure agreements were being used to prevent players and coaches from being able to speak out after they had been sacked – or ‘released early’ – from their contracts. This contrasted with the relatively middle of the road, inoffensive comments he had made during the on-the-record interview about how he was looking forward to returning to his former club for the second game of the season. In particular, ██████████ referred to how one ██████████ player, a former captain, had been, in his opinion, poorly treated. The player had been released from his contract a number of weeks earlier, said ██████████, but the club had still not announced it. ██████████ comments were clearly made to me off-the-record and in confidence, but they raised two issues. Firstly, they contrasted in both content and tone to the answers he had given when the microphone was running, and, secondly, they were clearly remarks of public interest (season ticket holders ██████████, for example, could make a strong case that they should be privy to such information when they pay substantial amounts of money each season to help finance the club) that I was now in possession of – what should I do with them? Publishing them would have felt like a breach of trust to ██████████, and I did not – and would not – reveal them in a story. But

what about me perpetrating a breach of trust to the club's supporters, who look at titles I work for and have worked for as a source of reliable information about their club? A conclusion that is not too hard to draw is that much of the content in sports journalism is something of a charade: a player delivers an on-the-record interview at a media day and doesn't deliver the whole truth; a journalist, who is then taken into the player's confidence following the interview, then respects the player's confidence and doesn't touch the subject that has been revealed off-the-record – or at least not immediately. It is like another form of non-disclosure agreement. It is not encapsulated in a series of clauses in a legal document, but is an unspoken and unwritten rule that is the backdrop to the interaction between journalist and player. It feels like a type of systemic form of informal censorship, and it can be dispiriting to think about, as it can feel duplicitous to the audience and rather like I'm staying on the surface of things.

Five days later I attended another media day, this time at [REDACTED]. Prior to the media day, I had spoken to another sports journalist who covers sport in the [REDACTED] closely, and he had told me that he too was aware of the ending of the contract of the former captain, and of the use of NDAs within the club. Nevertheless, when the club's director of rugby was interviewed, questions about the player's future and NDAs were not mentioned. As I write this reflection the following day, **my immediate formulation of the issue here is: cowardice or self-preservation/pragmatism?** After the interviews had been done, I spoke to the journalist again. He told me that he knew the club was going to issue a press release announcing the player's departure the following day, which they duly did. **This reinforces my feeling articulated in the previous paragraph, about there being a form of NDA that can permeate sports journalists' practice. The flow of information can be inhibited and in some sense bogus, with sports club's delivering at it at the timing of their choice, and the full story potentially going untold, if not 'covered up'.**

A sense of duty to readers (and myself) – as opposed to pragmatism – tells me the issue cannot be left here, and that the issue of NDAs by rugby clubs needs to be covered by me in a future article, if not one about a specific player. That is a way to ensure the subject is not swept under the carpet at supporters' expense, but it is also a way of not betraying a player's confidence.

**Entry date: 15 September 2018**

During the course of a student being on an internship with a news outlet, I was contacted as a matter of urgency by the outlet's sports editor. It emerged that the student had been baited by a sports fan on social media following a piece that he, the student, had written, and that the exchange had culminated in the student issuing a threat of violence to the fan (who was also a reader of the website) via a publicly-viewable tweet. It later emerged that the student had also engaged in a private exchange of messages with the same fan, during which he had called him a "pussy". This resulted in the student's placement being terminated and awkward conversations between me and the editor, who was nevertheless understanding of the issues that can arise through fan criticism/abuse on social media. While this incident concerned a student in this instance, the issue of responding to supporters' comments online is a very real one for any sports journalist who is an active

user of social media, and these days social media output is a key component of a sports journalist's overall output. Sports journalists are able to project a persona through social media that they were never able to do beforehand, and they are similarly able to communicate with sports fans with a directness what they were also never able to do beforehand. Personally, while I make a point of responding to sports fans who constructively reply to my tweets, I can't remember having ever engaged with any fans who have spoken personally or aggressively to me – it is a case of ignoring them. However, the issue of receiving abusive messages has not been a significant one for me, partially because – having spoken to other sports journalists – it seems to be football journalists who bear the brunt. With the issue in my mind, I mentioned the issue to one football journalist with a huge six-figure following on social media and he spoke of the need to have a thick skin in order to ignore the welter of abusively critical messages that often come his way. A female sports journalist specialising in football told me of the horrific abuse she has received, including abuse based on her ethnicity. Again, she prescribed a thick skin. However, a thick skin is not always easily acquired and comes easier to some than others; how to deal with trolls would seem to be an important element of a football journalist's ethics training. It is also worth noting that not all sports journalists take the same tack with abusive readers and trolls. While some adopt the 'thick skin and ignore' approach, others I know seek to take the critics on by replying with put downs that are often infused with irony.

News organisations have trained their employees over social media use; I have attended such training by the BBC. But should sports desks seek to issue more detailed advice and guidance about responding to social media-based calumny and abuse? Is there scope for it to be incorporated into a code(s)?

**Entry date: 30 September 2018**

For some time I have been seeking ways to investigate issues of doping in rugby union. I noticed that a contact (a recently retired player who I also know socially) had been appointed to an anti-doping committee. I arranged to meet him with a view to speaking to him on the record about his views on the extent of doping within the sport. Upon sitting down with him, it became apparent that he hadn't mentioned the fact he was meeting a journalist to the organization that had appointed him. Not wanting him to jeopardise his relationship with his new organisation, I suggested he clear it with them first and that we just speak off the record. He agreed. I could have tried to dissuade him to seek approval first and just immediately speak on the record, but this would have felt wrong – mainly because of my social connection with him. This is an instance of my personal connection with a contact perhaps interfering with my professional connection. If I didn't know him so well personally, then I wouldn't have had such qualms or been concerned about him harming his relationship with his organisation.

**Entry date: 15 November 2018**

I recently read a piece by a sports journalist I interviewed for the IPA interviews section of my data-gathering. During our interview we explored issues around self-censorship in sports journalism. What struck me when I read the piece was how unusually direct and in places

cutting it was towards a particular team and its director, so much so that my initial reaction to the piece was that it was a type of 'hatchet job'. It sparked the thought in me that perhaps the journalist had been more direct than he would otherwise have been due to the interview that he had had with me and the answers he had given to questions around self-censorship. Had the answers and thoughts that the interview had elicited prompted the interviewee to then write as stridently as he did? There is no way of establishing this either way, but it is an interesting thought that by interviewing the sports journalist I have potentially influenced the nature of their output, as they aim to – in a way – 'live up' to the answers they have given in their interview with me.

**Entry date: 25 February, 2019**

Over the weekend (February 22 and 23) I did my first set of freelance work for almost three months. The hiatus in freelance work was due to my dad having been seriously ill in December and me taking time out to visit him a considerable distance away. This gap is the longest I have ever had in between freelance work, and it made me realise how integral reporting – in particular, match reporting – had become to my sense of self and even well-being. The rhythm to my life has been considerably shaped by years of structuring numerous weekends around the attending and reporting on games, and the removal of that for a long-ish stretch of time left me with something resembling withdrawal symptoms. During parts of January I felt an occasional sense of restlessness at weekends, a restlessness from knowing that I was missing another weekend on the match schedule that has for many years provided a form of timetable to my life. I could recognise that I missed the satisfying 'buzz' of delivering a match commentary or the similar – but different – creative satisfaction of crafting a match report. However, I only really became aware of the absence of them from my life and what it meant when I secured my commissions for the weekend just gone. I arranged to cover a Friday night game as a writer, and a Saturday match as a co-commentator, and was also asked to do a couple of bits of radio punditry regarding the Six Nations. Having these on the diary made me feel focused and more at ease – generally more complete. Reflecting further, I realise that the 'hit' I get from producing such work is immediately satisfying in a way that other aspects of my life perhaps aren't. Working at a match is a discrete assignment; it is on the diary and then it is completed within the space of an afternoon or evening. I am on air for two hours, or I have my by-line by an article within minutes or a few hours of the match being over. If it is a job I feel that I have done well, then there is an immediate satisfaction. The assignment is then over and it is on to the next thing. The discrete nature of the work – of the creative process for each assignment having a clear start and end – makes it an orderly experience. This, combined with it being a publicly creative one, has maybe played a larger part than I had previously recognised in constituting what I am as not just a professional but as a person. It's not that I regard my freelance sports journalism as a drug upon which I have a dependence, but it is certainly the case that such work has helped bring a rhythm and order to my life, perhaps in contrast to the broken rhythms and relative disorder in other aspects of life in the past three years. To this extent it might be considered a form of fantasy, or escape – perhaps sports match reporting (to take the 'toy department' tag) has become a comforting toy for me to turn to and play with when other things seem less predictable or scheduled.

**Entry date: 6 March, 2019**

After a number of attempts, a contact within the anti-doping sector (who is also a personal friend) agreed to give an on-the-record interview regarding UK Anti-Doping figures which showed that rugby was the sport with the highest number of doping violations in the UK. We spoke for around 40 minutes, during which he gave me a number of newsworthy angles, including one relating to an event he had recently attended that focused on plans for the future doping education of athletes. From the start, the interview was conducted on the explicit basis that it was on the record. This was because during a previous meeting my contact had had second thoughts about speaking to a member of the press, and had therefore requested that we wait until he had had it cleared with UKAD that they were happy for him to speak to the media. This was the subsequent meeting at which what he said would be on the record. However, at the end of this second interview, out of consideration for our relationship away from sport, I felt I should check that he was content for everything to be on the record. I therefore asked him “Are you happy for everything that you’ve said to be used?” At this point, he paused and said he was happy for everything to be used with the exception of the quotes and information relating to the training, which he said involved a third party and which therefore he would prefer for me not to mention until they made it public. This desire of mine to check his willingness for material to be on the record therefore left me conflicted: use the best line, jeopardise the friendship/contact. However, the fact I had other strong material from the interview meant the frustration was not too acute. During my career, I have heard journalists say “Never check with someone whether what they’ve told you is on the record”, explaining that it opens the door to the best material you have being withdrawn. I can see the reasonableness of this if someone has previously indicated that what they’re going to tell you is on the record, and I have refrained from asking such questions myself in the past. However, my friendship with my contact meant this was an approach I would not have been comfortable taking, particularly because I myself sensed that what he had said to me in regard to the doping training could have been sensitive. So, although the material I had been given was in the public interest (doping in rugby and its testing is a high-profile issue), I was willing to withhold certain information from the public domain. This illustrates some of the factors that can complicate the flow of information in regard to stories in sports journalism, in this case through the presence of personal (friendship and respecting a friend’s wishes) and professional responsibilities (reporting matters that are in the public interest). One question niggles, though. How big would the revelation/story have to be for me to actually seriously consider ignoring – or overriding – a friend-contact’s request? I cannot honestly state that I would respect the request in every single instance; there is an element within me that agitates against agreeing to a blanket application of it. Reflecting on this, I think that streak has always been in me, both when working as a staff journalist and as a freelancer. Around eight years ago, I recall publishing a story about a potential change to the global rugby calendar that a director of rugby at a Premiership club had mentioned to me. He had volunteered the information to me, and only subsequently added a request for me to not to publish a story around it. At that time, I justified publishing a story about it by reasoning that a retrospective request for off-the-record was non-binding; it should be weighed up, but rejected if the matter at hand was deemed too big a story by me. In hindsight, I acknowledge that part of the decision to publish was motivated by the vainglory and career-

benefit of publishing an exclusive story; my editor and rival sports journalists would hold me in higher esteem due to the scoop. However, I do remember feeling a pang of awkwardness about it when I held the physical published paper in my hands and saw the story in print, and I was awkward too the next time I saw the director of rugby, who did mention it and was less than thrilled (although it didn't, as far as I could tell, damage our professional relationship in terms of future interactions).

**Entry date: 15 March 2019**

A week ago, I covered a match for a national newspaper. As I arrived at the ground just under an hour before kick off, I was phoned by the assistant sports editor who told me he had been tipped off that the grandfather of one of the players involved, an England international, had been swept out to sea in Granada earlier in the week and was presumed dead. The assistant editor said that a staff reporter on the paper had already spoken to the player's agent and club's press office, both of whom said they had heard nothing about the alleged incident. The assistant editor asked whether I could make some enquiries among people I knew at the club – and given that I had been commissioned by the title to cover the match, the implication was that if I could establish that the tip-off was accurate, I was to incorporate the fact into my match report. The editor acknowledged to me that it was “a delicate one”. It immediately raised concerns in my mind of possible intrusion into grief – if I was to have it stood up by sources at the club but was unable to speak to the player before it was contained in an article, then I would be uneasy about him reading about such a traumatic incident without me having spoken to him first. (Another issue was whether it was actually my responsibility as a freelancer who had been commissioned solely to cover the match to also investigate a potential player bereavement.) I told the editor I would make enquiries but gave no guarantee I would include it in a story if it was a fact I was able to stand up. Having spoken to two sources, neither of whom had heard the rumour, I then had to concentrate on the match and the on-the-whistle match report. By the time I phoned in to check that my emailed match report had arrived the assistant editor was off duty and I spoke to another member on the desk who did not mention the tip off. The issue therefore did not come to a head with an obvious ethical dilemma because I was unable to ascertain the facts. However, it illustrates that even an assignment such as a match report can pose unexpected ethical and professional quandaries for a freelance sports journalist.

## Appendix 5b)

### RUGBY WORLD CUP 2019 AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC LOG (RWC)

#### 2 October

The first day of work involved attending team training sessions and press conferences the day before a pool match. The game involved one of the UK home nations. The hours in the stadium press room spent writing up the content derived from the press conferences provided an insight into the way that the dynamics of a press pack can work when it is “on tour”, with the division of labour uneven, but the atmosphere jovial and mutually supportive. A number of the journalists covering the home nation team had been out the previous evening and at least one did not attend the press conference due, according to his colleagues, to being hungover. Nevertheless, one of the journalists who did attend transcribed the entire interview with the coach who had given the press conference. Not only did he offer to email it to all the other journalists in the pack who were in the press room, but he made it clear he would also send it onto a journalist who wasn't. Interestingly, one of the main talking points among the main pack of journalists covering the home nation was their failure to collect a receipt from the previous evening's meal out (which had involved the consumption of expensive Kobe beef). This caused considerable fretting over expenses claims not being accepted. There was much relief when word got back that one of the journalists not in attendance at the press conference had gone back to the restaurant and secured a receipt. The journalists had simultaneously been working hard on delivering material derived from the press conference and solving their mini-expenses crisis.

The atmosphere between the writers felt strongly like that of friends out to enjoy one another's company on a subject they shared an interest in rather than that of rivals out to scoop one another. While there were some comments made about the missing journalist(s), these were expressed far more in terms of joshing mild criticism than in terms of professional annoyance (e.g. “He should be hung over on his own time!”, and anecdotes about drunkenness during other tournaments).

One of the stories that we picked up at the press conference was one which had a longer shelf life than the others. This prompted discussion among the group about how long we should mutually self-embargo the piece as a pack. We agreed that we wouldn't collectively file the story to our desks or publish until Sunday. This is a common journalistic practice, and one that was observed from the very start of my time covering the World Cup. It is, it seems to me, an example of a media pack self-policing regarding the flow of information.

Unrelated to the current World Cup, a journalist told me in conversation that he had once been told by two England players who both played for a club that he covered that they would rather not do phone interviews with him. Instead, they explained that they were happy for him to write “their” quotes on their behalf. Effectively, this was an invitation for the journalist to make up quotes; looked at another way, it was also an expression of a high level of trust in the journalist in question from the players. Looked at another way still, it could be construed that the players viewed the journalist as weak – they were, it might be surmised, suggesting that the journalist would never write anything that would cast them in



a bad light. To that extent, they perhaps viewed him as a cheerleader. The journalist explained to me that he had said to the two players that he would provide them in advance of publication the quotes that he was proposing to attribute to them. However, the journalist said that the players weren't interested in this; they would be happy not to have sight of any "quotes" in advance of publication. The journalist explained that he had gone along with this, and suggested the arrangement had come in handy when the publication he worked for at the time was short of stories. It was quite an admission that left me wondering at the gap between what is true and what is published, and how wide that gap can be if journalists are wilfully stretching it through such agreements.

### 3 October

Today was a match day. Before the game, however, the Rugby World Cup media department in conjunction with the local tourism board had arranged a sightseeing tour of Kobe for rugby journalists. Among the items on the itinerary were a lunch of Kobe beef and a trip to a sake brewery. The brewery visit concluded with the group trying five varieties of sake and then getting back on the sightseeing bus to be taken to the ground. While the alcohol consumed did not, in my opinion, at all compromise the professionalism of any of the journalists involved, the experience did serve to underscore the sense that the coverage of the World Cup was one of play as much as work. And, in addition, [of the 10 sports journalists on the tour, all were male. The sense of it being something of a "boys' club" was unavoidable.](#)

A day after the sightseeing tour the city tourism board organisers sent out an email saying they wanted to see evidence of content that would promote in-bound tourism. This prompted a number of the journalists who had been on the tour to issue social media posts that were thinly veiled plugs for the city as a destination. This inevitably raised questions about a quid pro quo – we got a lovely tour and lunch, they got some positive publicity. It was a fresh ethical dimension to the experience of covering a World Cup. Consciences didn't seem to be troubled because the tour and the city itself were genuinely excellent.

That evening at the match, the home nation made heavy weather against low-ranked, weaker opposition. Things were particularly disjointed for them at the start of the second half when a young player came on in a pivotal position. I drafted an initial match report in which I was highly critical of the player, but then toned down the criticism and made it less directly about him. Why? On re-reading, I felt it was too brutal, and I did consider the player's feelings – and the fact he was young did influence me; rightly or wrongly, I think criticism can be more damaging to someone at the very start of their international career than a more established player. I considered, too, the fact that to go guns blazing in my first match report could cause ripples of acrimony between me and the nation's media manager. However, I wanted my criticism to be conveyed. As such, it was toned down but the point remained. This felt like mild self-censorship but one which didn't significantly compromise me: I was still voicing my view, just in a moderated fashion. Neither cheerleader nor assassin, I was somewhere in between.

Given the subject of my research project's initial case study, it was somewhat ironic – or perhaps appropriate – that I was put next to David Walsh in the press box.



#### **4 & 5 October**

The Rugby World Cup, like other major global sporting events, employs a team of media professionals to record, transcribe and then distribute to the world's media the key quotes from each press conference. It is called the Rugby News Service (RNS). The question arises as to how far one should (or shouldn't) rely on this when covering teams. On the one hand, it is a hugely helpful tool. It is not possible to attend all conferences, and it is a good means of keeping abreast with who is saying what in various camps. However, based on my experience, certain quotes can be omitted or not given in full. This particularly applies to quotes given on controversial topics or on issues which might be critical of the governing body World Rugby or the Rugby World Cup. Therefore, the service is not an excuse for non-attendance, not least because if you're not present you cannot ask the questions that might/will elicit the answers you are looking for.

However, I did take RNS quotes from one coach whose press conference I had not attended. Based on the quotes that were distributed, I identified an angle I could take. I did some research, copy and pasted in the quotes, crafted the piece a bit more to smooth it out, and then filed it with an editor back in the UK. This story was subsequently published. I did something similar the next day, using quotes given in a RNS release as the basis for some social media posts that previewed an England match. Using the service is ok – but only up to a point and only with an awareness of its limitations; and one must be wary of over-reliance and complacency.

#### **6 October**

Day off in Tokyo.

#### **7 October**

I arrived in Hamamatsu today and attended a team announcement press conference. Notable here was an interview given by one of the players, who stood out from the common run of press conference interviewees by delivering passionate, open answers, where he was at times emotional about the challenges of being away from his family for such a long stretch. He also gave comments about the forecast typhoon which were frank and amusing – and probably not what the team media manager would have advised. The response from the press corps to this interview was one of glee; glee because by common agreement the player's comments were refreshingly frank and engaging amid so many bland interviews. This is connected, I think, to **the “ground hog day” environment that can arise among press packs that are following the same team around day after day, week after week. When there is a long turnaround between matches – say, seven or eight days – journalists struggle to find new angles and stories when they are interviewing the same group of players day in, day out. In this sense, I am finding it professionally invigorating to be covering two different teams, and therefore moving around and avoiding the “ground hog day” syndrome, which can infect the press pack with a certain weariness.**

**That evening there was a 5-a-side football match arranged by the national team's management team with the journalists. The journalists were low on numbers and invited me (who felt like a bit of an English interloper) to play. The match was competitive but**

played in an excellent spirit. The activity raises questions about the extent of closeness between teams and the media. On one level, it was simply an activity designed to fill an evening and get some exercise on a long tour. On another, is the team management trying to curry favour with the journalists and potentially make them more compliant? While things were very cordial and we, the media pack members, were given a lift back to the hotel by the management side, there was a certain distance. There was no suggestion of a post-match drink together, for example. So, while there was a certain friendliness between press and team management, a sense of distance remained intact too.

### 8 October

On the eve of a match, I bumped into a number of players in the hotel onsen – or traditional Japanese spa. I chatted to one, although kept the topic off rugby out of a respect for privacy and his own need for professional preparation. After the team played well the following night, I wrote a brief diary item for a Sunday newspaper about the players using hot waters the night before a game and them being “too hot to handle”. However, I kept it general and did not identify certain players, again out of a sense of respect for privacy. The specifics of the players’ behaviour and conversations I regarded as being off limits. In retrospect, this approach seems to me to have been the right one to have taken, balancing as it does some pertinent information about the team’s preparation with a respect for the team and individuals’ privacy and preparation.

The journalists covering one of the nations are using a WhatsApp group, both to arrange social activities and to “banter”, but also to share work-related information. The information can range from the time of a train to a discussion about who is writing up the quotes from a certain interview and what time a particular interview is self-embargoed until. It is a form of journalistic co-operation that also appears to grease the wheels socially. What is noticeable is how “on tour” a lot of the content is – all the members of the group are men and it often has a bloke-ish tenor.

### 9 October

Following a match, the division of labour among the pack of journalists covering a specific nation was striking. This division primarily focused on the process of the pooling of interview transcriptions and the pack’s self-embargoing of articles based on those interviews (similar to 2 October). The journalists emailed transcriptions of interviews to one another and then verbally – and sometimes in text – discussed and agreed on what time each interview piece could be published from. This, traditionally, is to ensure no-one looks silly by being “beaten” to a story by a rival title, while also keeping the sports desk back home happy by there being a steady supply of items. This practice was particularly marked with this certain group of journalists, who would often make editorial judgements on behalf of the rest of the pack (e.g. “I’ve just emailed the quotes from x, if anyone’s desperate. It’s for Monday-for-Tuesday publication: not before 10pm on Monday.”) Editorial judgements around newsworthiness therefore became, in a sense, corporate. The flow of information was thus internally regulated by the pack; it was not self-censorship as such, but there was certainly self-regulation of the flow of information by the pack. The journalistic pack, it seems to me, takes on a significance greater than the sum of its parts, sculpting the flow of future information.

### **10 October**

The tournament organisers, World Rugby, made announcements about the scheduling/rescheduling of games due to the forecast super-typhoon. Following this, one of the nations potentially affected by the changes called a press conference to discuss the situation. Within the group of journalists covering the nation in question, there were complaints from some writers that broadcasters were getting more immediate access to key interviewees, such as the chair of the national governing body. Photographers then also contributed, saying they had felt marginalised for years by the way national team's press departments handled press calls. This raises questions about the shifting hierarchy of media relevance. *The Times*, for example, no longer receives the first-choice access it once – as the paper of record – would have got. Some journalists effectively just shrug their shoulders at this and accept it as the way of the world now; other writers express genuine frustration – and sometimes even anger – at it.

### **11 October**

Today involved me attending the captain's run for a side ahead of their final pool match. Prior to the event, there had been concerns raised about the quality of the pitch. At the training session to which the media was invited for the first 10 minutes, the team's coaches seemed to make great play of the surface, almost hamming up their concern. They were bending down and picking up turf, apparently for the cameras' benefit. By then conveying these pictures, were the media complicit in conveying coaches' concerns about the surface? The question is significant as it captures the potential extent to which the media help project teams' agendas.

Following the filming access, a coach and two players attended a press conference. I posed a typhoon-related question that was effectively not answered by the coach. When I raised my hand to ask a follow-up question and request a proper answer, the chair of the press conference (employed by World Rugby) shook his head at me and moved onto another journalist. It felt like a form of question-dodging; and by restricting questions, it felt like I was being side-lined to make way for potentially softer/easier questions. In that moment, I felt frustrated by the World Cup's media management processes.

I spent a considerable amount of time working on a story about the typhoon and how its progress potentially affected certain teams. I got a strong, critical quote from a former international player but he would only let me use his quotes on condition of anonymity. I usually desist from using anonymous sources as I feel they undermine the credibility of a story (unless there is a genuine need for whistle-blower protection of identity), but given the source's standing and given the magnitude of the story, I went for it. I explained the situation to the newspaper back in the UK and they were happy to run it. This underscored, to me, the legitimacy of the occasional use of the anonymous source, provided the reason and context is conveyed and cleared by the sports desk.

### **12 October**

Being busy as a freelancer is obviously desirable. But what constitutes too much work or too many orders? I have had situations in the past where I have been stretched in terms of the amount of work I have had on whilst covering a match, and this was the case again this

evening, with the added pressure of it being a World Cup. I had two on-the-whistle reports to file within seconds of the final whistle, a quotes-based reflective match report for a Sunday newspaper to write, and then a double page spread with team ratings for a second Sunday title. When having pressure arising from multiple commissions, one question that arises is: what are acceptable levels of similarity/ difference in copy? If I am commissioned by outlets to cover a game then I believe – for my own sense of professional worth and for the sake of each title’s integrity – there should be something approaching total freshness in each piece that I submit. This means providing fresh descriptions, fresh observations and – to an extent – fresh quotes and interviews for each piece. However, when working against numerous tight deadlines it can be hard to achieve this. As in the past, I overcame this editorial issue by doing extensive preparation prior to the match. I provisionally drafted elements of each article before the game had even begun, focusing on potential talking points and outcomes, and devising certain turns of phrase. Inevitably, not all of this got used; events as they unfold overtake much of the pre-planned material. However, drafting material in advance like this functions as a form of safety net for me, knowing that I have some content to fall back on should time constraints be intense and/or should it actually be a dull match.

My commitment to accuracy is always paramount in my work as a journalist. However, it was as though I felt a sharper sense of professional obligation on this evening of intense work. It was the evening which I always knew was going to be my busiest of the tournament, and in that sense it felt to me like a defining day of my own World Cup experience. Because of my exposure through multiple national platforms and on a world stage, I felt an intense awareness of ensuring I got things absolutely right in my work. I felt on my mettle, and I felt an adrenaline rush from the moment I woke up to the moment I went, exhausted, to bed. While demanding, it is professionally invigorating. I haven’t felt as professionally alive for as long as I can remember, or as alive in a general sense.

### **13 October**

I travelled to Yokohama today for the final game of Pool A, Japan versus Scotland. It was a game that had been on the verge of being cancelled due to Typhoon Hagibis, and the tournament directors had received criticism from some quarters for their perceived lack of contingency planning. So when the tournament director and World Rugby’s head of communications came into the stadium’s media centre two hours before kick off there was some interest on what they were doing/had to say. Interestingly, despite the potential cancellation having greater direct consequence for Scotland and therefore Scottish journalists, the tournament director went straight to English newspaper journalists to have an off-the-record discussion. This irked some of the Scotland journalists, who amongst themselves expressed their view that they felt they were being overlooked. There was an understandable slight sense of us-and-them tribalism.

In the post-match mixed zone, I was keen to interview some prominent Japan players so I could use them as preview material for their quarter final with South Africa. While some translators were available, I ended up interviewing two English-speaking players who were born outside of Japan (one in Samoa, one in South Africa). Looking back on this, I realise that the language barrier prompted me to opt for the arguably more straightforward route of interviewing English-speaking players. This, however, can skew coverage and the perception

of the Japanese team. If the UK-based/Western media is producing content about Japan that is focused disproportionately on what non-native Japan players are saying, then that could create – or reinforce – the impression that the Japan team is predominantly made up of foreign-born players. This, in turn, could reinforce ideas about the Japan side being in some way “inauthentic”, and overlook the contribution made by native Japan players. If I had my time in the mixed zone again, I would have made greater efforts to capture a broader range of interviews, although mixed zones can be chaotic, slightly frantic places.

The mixed zones have been the only opportunity to get anything resembling a one-on-one interview, and given that they are brief encounters – with the players milling around for a bit before shepherded off by their media teams – they are not the ideal situation in which to gain a deep insight. All mid-week press access is done through “top table” interviews, with no one-on-one access. This is in some way blunting, as it means it is rare and harder now for journalists to gain their own unique line from a player. However, to me it has also underscored the importance of looking away from the cycle of press conferences for stories. When covering stories relating to the typhoon, for example, I looked to high-profile ex-players for their views, and when the situation threatened to go legal I contacted a firm of solicitors in London that specialises in sports law. This helped provide fresh angles and fresh perspectives away from the bubble that can grow up around sports journalists as they go from press conference to press conference.

#### **14 October**

**As I was preparing to leave Japan, a row broke out between three journalists that was conducted via a Whatsapp group. The row focused on accusations from two of the journalists that the third had effectively gone behind their back in pursuit of a story. The precise rights and wrongs were hard to determine, but what I sensed was a boiling over of perhaps simmering tensions that had built up over the course of a long tour. Covering such tournaments can be emotionally and physically draining, with all the travel and in some instances being cheek-by-jowl with other journalists, some of whom you will get on with better than others. While camaraderie is the predominant state of affairs, tensions inevitably arise around news-gathering methods and also, I feel, around who is the pre-eminent senior journalist: the king of the pack, the alpha sports journalist. The journalists’ team being knocked out of the tournament seemed to be the catalyst to those tensions coming to the boil.**

#### **21 October**

Prior to going out to Japan, I was approached by a PR agency representing tournament sponsor Mastercard. They wanted me to do an interview with a former England star who won the World Cup in 2003. This player was a so-called ambassador for Mastercard. I did the interview, watched England’s opening pool stage match against Tonga with him, and the piece was published a few days later. Today, Mastercard approached me to see if I was still in Japan, and if so whether I wanted to attend the Mastercard suite at the Yokohama Stadium to watch England versus New Zealand there. I was already back in the UK, so had to turn it down. Clearly, the invitation is an exciting one. But as a journalist one has to be wary of becoming too cosy with the sponsors, although in fairness such closeness could facilitate future player access, which in turn could lead to interesting articles. If you are cosy with a sponsor, you are several degrees closer to the corporate powers running the tournament.

And if you are receiving hospitality from the sponsor, then your ability to report independently on the tournament is potentially undermined. So the relationship with companies like Mastercard and their PRs is double-edged. It could facilitate player interview access that I otherwise wouldn't get, which could lead to fans receiving fresh insights. But it could also draw me into the rugby circus, rather than reporting objectively on that circus. It is important to be cognisant of the tension when interacting with such companies.

## **26 October**

Since returning from Japan, I have been in some demand as a radio pundit. I assume this is linked to the increased profile that comes from having been out in Japan covering the tournament on the ground. I appeared on BBC Wales' breakfast show yesterday to preview the semi-finals, and today BBC 5 live asked me to appear on the evening show to offer my thoughts on England's win over New Zealand, and to also give some thoughts on Wales versus South Africa. The 5 live show had a phone-in element and two other pundits, and I always feel the challenge in such an environment is to keep the views expressed honest and measured. Phone-ins, or situations where there are multiple pundits, can often lead to x taking one view, and y taking the other, with producers sometimes trying to tee up such oppositions/controversies. When delivering such punditry, the audience (and producer) want you to express a clear, interesting view, but the challenge is to be able to convey nuance too. Phoney oppositions are to be avoided. I felt I delivered this, articulating my honestly held views and not exaggerating or modifying them for dramatic effect.

## Appendix 5c) Autoethnography Themes Sheet

### Main themes emerging from autoethnographic logs:

**YELLOW:** Closeness to sources. Closeness-distance tension with sources and how this ties in with the pragmatic-duty tension. Impact of social media on relationships with sources

**TURQUOISE:** Reasons for self-censorship in sports journalism

**BRIGHT GREEN:** Use of social media to promote personal journalistic brand

**PINK:** Shifting identity as a multi-platform sports journalist, and pressures arising from working on multiple platforms

**Red:** Rhythm of freelance work as forming a central aspect of researcher's sense of personal identity, not just professional identity

**BLUE:** Autonomy/freedom as a reporter to cover live events as I see them, rather than through an imposition from the sports desk of the angle that is to be taken.

**TEAL:** Respecting off-the-record information, even when it's not explicitly stated that it's off-the-record, and even when there is a temptation to run it. Ethics of running blander on-the-record comments when you know the interviewee's true view (expressed off-the-record) are very different. Difficulties arising if the off-the-record comments are in the public interest. Extent to which the truth is thereby in some way deliberately concealed.

**DARK YELLOW:** Restrictions imposed by club media departments and efforts to resist them, including the efficacy of representations made by a sports writers' club/association

**GRAY:** Conditionality of sports media content (i.e. conditions attached by PR agents for access)

**LIGHT GRAY:** Embargoes as self-policing journalism by "gentleman's agreement", and having a potential distorting effect on flow of information. "Corporate" news judgements, in which the pack becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

**Pink** Ways to handle social media abuse directed at one as a sports journalist. Is there a need for more support from employers, or guidance in a code?

**Light green** Making up quotes with professional sportsperson's express approval

**Blue** World Cup reporting having a "boys' club" feel

**Bold** Disputes and arguments among sports journalists on tour; allegations of bad behaviour by sports journalists towards other sports journalists

**Orange** Media management techniques at World Cup impeding ability to get detailed truthful answers; importance of breaking out of press conference “bubble” to gain stories