

ARTICLE TITLE: FOLLOWING THE ACTION: How live bloggers are reimagining the professional ideology of sports journalism

Live sports blogging is a relatively new form of journalism in wide and frequent use by media companies but has received little attention from the academy. This article outlines a study that explored the belief and value system behind live sports blogging to establish whether shifts were taking place within the professional ideology of sports journalism. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 live sports bloggers in the U.K. The study found live bloggers retained core journalistic values and beliefs of balancing objectivity and subjectivity, immediacy, providing a public service and editorial autonomy. However, live blogging's challenges of immediacy, interactivity and shifting consumption patterns have led to a re-imagining of what these concepts mean and the skills and competences required. Live bloggers perceived their role as community builders and mediators of discussion as well as information providers and this represents a new openness and inclusivity within the occupational base. Participants did not regard these changes to be a dumbing down of standards but rather a paradigm shift towards flattening hierarchies between journalist and audience. The findings suggest live bloggers have shown a greater willingness to adapt than previous research into the migration of sports journalists to digital platforms has found.

KEYWORDS live blogs; sports journalism; digital journalism; sports media; Web 2.0; professional ideology; online journalism; new media

Introduction

Sports journalism practice has attracted interest from scholars in recent years as developments in information technology have led to significant changes in work organisation, conditions and routines (Hutchins and Rowe 2012; Boyle 2013). Sports media academics have focused on the impact of Twitter (Sheffer and Schultz 2010a, 2010b; Hutchins 2011; Reed 2012; Price, Farrington and Hall 2012, 2013; McEnnis 2013; Gibbs and Haynes 2013) and the transition of working practices from print to online (Sherwood and Nicholson 2013; Ketterer, McGuire and Murray 2014). Scholars have interrogated blogging (Schultz and Sheffer 2007; Hardin and Ash 2011; Kian, Burden Jnr and Shaw 2011) but live sports blogging has received scant attention within the academy.

Live blogging is a relatively new form of journalism that involves conveying informational updates in real time. Live blogging originated in the U.K. during the 1998 soccer World Cup in France (Smyth and Murray 2014) but has since become a commonly used format in the digital provision of major news organisations (Thurman and Walters 2012). In their case study of *guardian.co.uk*, Thurman and Walters (2012) discovered live blogging encompasses breaking news stories, key political developments and entertainment such as TV shows or film events but that sport is the most commonly used form. This suggests sports live blogging deserves greater focus with little known of the value and belief system that underpins its practice.

Recent studies have shown that professional ideology warrants close scrutiny as journalism practice increasingly moves to digital platforms. Sports media research has found that sport journalists cling on to traditional values in the migration to online practices but scholars have concentrated on blogging (Schultz and Sheffer 2007) or Facebook and Twitter (Sherwood and Nicholson 2013). Other academics have expressed concerns that online journalism has led to a decline in standards by over-prioritising immediacy at the expense of accuracy (Hall 2001). Furthermore, interactivity between journalist and audience has emerged as a key feature of online journalism that rarely existed in traditional media practices (Singer 2009, 2011; Hermida 2011; Reich 2011; Vujnovic 2011).

Live sports blogging remains relatively unexplored in this context, particularly in the United Kingdom. This article outlines a study that explored the professional ideology of live sports bloggers using in-depth semi-structured interviews with 10 participants across print, broadcast and web-specific media organisations. The aim of the study was to map the belief and value system of live sports blogging and identify whether shifts had taken place within the professional ideology of sports journalism. This would then provide an insight into a possible future trajectory with digital platforms and practices becoming increasingly central to the professional base of journalism and the business models of media companies.

Professional Ideology of Sports Journalism

This study used the term 'professional ideology' as an operational concept that can be defined as a shared belief and value system within an occupational group (Deuze 2005). There are recurring themes within scholarly literature that help to define a professional ideology within journalism: objective journalism that is fair and unbiased while being emotionally detached and distanced from its subject matter (Aldridge and Evetts 2003; Ward 2004; Deuze 2005; Harcup 2009; Cole and Harcup 2010), journalism as providing a valuable service for the public (Aldridge and Evetts 2003; Deuze 2005; Harcup 2007; Sheridan Burns 2013), journalism as editorially independent and not influenced by either internal forces such as media ownership or external agencies including Government (Ward 2004; Deuze 2005; Harcup 2007) and journalism as the reporting of accurate and true facts delivered to audiences with immediacy (Deuze 2005; Harcup 2009).

Boyle (2006) argues that sports journalists share values with the wider newsroom as they are part of the same organisational culture while Salwen and Garrison (1998) described professionalism as a mutual concern. Boyle insists that sport earns its place within wider journalism because it is about "facilitating discussion on a range of social, political, economic and cultural issues pertinent to a society" (2006, 13). Reed's (2012) survey of American sports journalists' social media use revealed that public interest, truth, accuracy and impartiality were frequent descriptors of professionalism and this could be interpreted as being broadly consistent with wider journalism.

However, the sports desk is considered to have a problematic and sometimes paradoxical relationship with professional ideology (Rowe 2004). Sports journalists place greater emphasis on subjectivity and entertainment (Salwen and Garrison 1998; Rowe 2004; Boyle 2006), comment, opinion and partisanship (Rudin and Ibbotson 2003), and gossip and rumour (Boyle 2006). There are also professional challenges such as the struggle for objectivity because of being emotionally detached and distanced from subject matter due to personal affiliation to sports clubs (Boyle 2006).

There are also competing tensions in how sports journalism views its public service function. Rowe describes this as the cheerleader versus crusaders debate where the majority of sports journalists perform the cheerleading function in “describing sports events and passing on news about them rather than interrogating and probing their subject with vigour” (2004, 51). Boyle (2006) points out that a decline in investigative journalism is a wider industry concern while stressing that there is a greater need than ever for sports journalism to provide a crusader function because of the growing commercialisation and politicisation of sport. However, the more trivial and popular side of sports journalism can still play an important role in providing information and narratives that matter to communities and identity formation (Boyle 2006; Sugden and Tomlinson 2010).

Sports journalists strive for editorial independence yet are too close to their sources to the point of collusion (Sugden and Tomlinson 2007) while also enjoying a cozy relationship with colleagues working for other news organisations, known as the ‘press pack’ (Boyle 2006). Sports journalists are also under close scrutiny to report true facts and be accurate because they have to display similar in-depth knowledge of statistics and figures as fans (Rowe 2004). Sports journalists can be taken less seriously by news colleagues as they carry a reputation of ‘fans with typewriters’ (Boyle 2006) and as inhabiting the ‘toy department’ (Rowe 2004).

Historically, broadsheet sports journalists consider their output to be art, tabloid sports journalists are more concerned with economy and speed (Rowe 2004) and broadcast sports journalism is characterised by neutrality and impartiality while being shaped to an extent by television’s need as a medium to provide entertainment (Whannel 1992). However, there are indications of shifts in recent years towards convergence and homogeneity. Boyle (2006) argues broadcast sports journalism has evolved in the U.K. towards bias through the radio station *Talksport* and the satellite TV channels of *Sky Sports* driven by wider commercial pressures. Sugden and Tomlinson (2010) argue that the emergence of 24-hour rolling sports news on *Sky Sports News* combined with the need to constantly update websites means both print and broadcast sports journalists have experienced intensified production processes that demand greater subjectivity in the form of sports chatter.

Online Practices and Professional Ideology

A key debate in recent years in journalism studies has been whether the migration and adaptation of journalists’ work routines and practices to digital platforms has led to a reinterpretation of professional ideology. Deuze (2005) argues that multimedia and multiculturalism are bringing about shifts in the meanings that journalists attach to news work. However, these changes are not without challenges, contradictions and complexity. For Deuze, objectivity now carries multiple meanings because of a complex and diverse society while the notion of professional distance is at odds with the need for inclusivity. Providing a public service no longer carries a hierarchical, top-down meaning but is instead bottom-up and a conversation that society is having with itself. Journalistic autonomy needs to be shared with communities rather than be seen as an individual freedom. Immediacy becomes a contestation between market-driven speed of publication and the need for in-depth, inclusive and multi-perspective storytelling.

However, other studies have found that the bringing together of journalists and audience does not necessarily lead to greater inclusivity or even harmony. The interaction

between journalist and reader and audience participation are critical concerns in new media research (Singer 2009, 2011; Hermida 2011; Reich 2011; Vujnovic 2011). In old media, the feedback loop was relatively slow through phone-ins and letters pages (Reich 2011; Whannel 2014) while the “mainstream media were, typically, fairly disdainful of or patronizing to, their audiences” (Whannel 2014, 773). User-generated content helps to “provide a platform for debate and discourse” (Singer 2009, 132) yet journalists apply their traditional value and belief system in trying to maintain a quality control of sorts over audience contributions that appear in the mainstream media (Hermida and Thurman 2008; Singer 2009). Journalists often moderate comments to meet professional norms such as “spelling, punctuation, accuracy and balance” (Thurman 2008, 144) and protect professional status (Hermida 2011). This new interactive landscape has meant user comments can be abusive towards journalists (Singer 2011) and are “less thoughtful and more impulsive, shallow and aggressive than earlier forms of audience participation” (Reich 2011, 113).

The mainstream media’s incorporation of user-generated content has posed new ethical and ideological questions for journalists surrounding whether they are acting in the public’s best interests as the audience now acts as both producers and consumers of content (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010) with “their rewards...not wages but rather a sense of being part of an online community” (Vujnovic 2011, 150).

Recent research into how sports journalists have adapted to online platforms has found that professional ideology has not evolved. Sports journalists must now be technologically adept and incorporate multimedia elements such as audio, video, data, photos and links into their storytelling (Pedersen 2013) but they have attempted to cling on to traditional values in digital and social media practices such as blogging (Schultz and Sheffer 2007) and Facebook and Twitter (Sherwood and Nicholson 2013). Sports journalists can be pressed by management into reluctantly engaging with online practices and that enforcing rather than evolving professional ideology was seen as a means of protecting and maintaining standards (Schultz and Sheffer 2007). Furthermore, sports journalists still performed the gatekeeping and sensemaking role in online interactions with the audience while seeing themselves as the ‘experts’ (Sherwood and Nicholson 2013). However, the move to online platforms represents an opportunity for greater agency for sports journalists because “the new media world is interactive, vibrant and autonomous with much potential for freedom and equality” (Laucella 2013, 97).

The Emergence of Live Blogging as a Journalistic Practice

Live blogging represents a potentially illuminating media practice with which to re-examine professional ideology within a digital environment. Live blogs are specific to online platforms and are a format that uses the software and hardware capabilities of 21st-Century technology to provide constantly updated and immediate information. Live blogging has changed the way journalists convey reports of the sporting event to the public in that they now happen in real time and not just following the contest. They are also an under-researched form of journalism.

Live blogging has been described by sports website the *Bleacher Report* as “a running commentary on an event in motion” (Wood 2011) and from within the academy as a “a single blog post on a specific topic to which time-stamped content is progressively added for a finite period—anywhere between half an hour and 24 hours” (Thurman and Walters 2012, 83). Live blogging’s value as a reporting method is debated. It has been described as the

future of journalism because of its instantaneity, transparency and embracing of the audience (Wells 2011). On the other hand, live blogging has been perceived as the death of journalism as it stands accused of incoherence and lack of structure (Symes 2011). Live blogging is an attractive format for media organisations because, unlike live tweeting, it brings audiences to a space where advertising can be directly monetised (Tornøe 2014). Live blogs also provide a filter on the most important and relevant information (O'Mahony 2014). Furthermore, live blogging as a web page encourages either lengthy or repeated visits and is cheap to resource because it is labour rather than capital intensive (Thurman and Walters 2012).

The Guardian started live blogging its first minute-by-minute football match during the 1998 soccer World Cup (Smyth and Murray 2014) although the oldest available online is a Champions League match between Inter Milan and Manchester United in March 1999 (The Guardian 1999; Ashrowan 2014) which contained basic journalist-led regular updates of live action. Live blogging has since integrated audience comments and multimedia elements, expanded into other areas of journalism such as news, politics and entertainment and been widely adopted as a digital format by both newspaper and broadcast organisations.

Thurman and Walters (2012) describe the process of live blogging as a shift of the journalist's role away from first-hand reporting and towards second-hand reporting, mediation and curation. Live sports blogs are also characterised by their predictability, casual tone, fewer multimedia elements, links to multimedia for entertainment purposes and high levels of interaction with the audience (Thurman and Walters 2012). However, live blogging is not immune from wider concerns surrounding the sacrificing of accuracy for speed in online settings and this has raised issues surrounding verification of facts (Thurman and Walters 2012; Thorsen 2013).

Live blogs were initially devised for an audience without access to the live sports event but content is now accessible across first screen (television), second-screen (desktop and laptop computing) and third screen (mobile phones and tablets) platforms (Hutchins 2014). All three screens can be in simultaneous usage with mobile and online services providing added value to the experience of live TV sports watching (Boyle 2014). The challenge for live bloggers has been to adapt the format for use on small-screen, mobile devices (Anderson 2011) with major news organisations such as *The Guardian* making functional adjustments to the architecture to facilitate accessibility (Ashrowan 2014). The short and frequent posts that live blogs provide are suited to small screens (Thurman 2013).

Steensen (2011), in his analysis of live coverage of football matches in two Norwegian online newspapers, found sports journalists embrace a norm of subjectivity in their interaction with readers while "objectivity is an unwanted and perhaps impossible value to maintain" (2011, 700). Steensen explains that, "The communication becomes personified, thus prompting journalists to give something of themselves in order to attract partners in dialogue among the audience." (2011, 700). For Steensen, the focus is on pleasing the audience participants rather than maintaining critical distance.

Methodology

This study attempted to explore the professional ideology of live sports bloggers before identifying shifts within the belief and value system of sports journalism. In-depth

semi-structured interviews were used to explore the way live bloggers give meaning to their professional practice. This is a common approach in studies that aim to understand and make sense of sports journalists' work environment (Rowe 2004; Boyle 2006; Price, Farrington and Hall 2012; Hutchins and Rowe 2012).

Ten participants were selected from the U.K. national sports media and this small sample size enabled each case to be explored in significant depth. The sample comprised of eight males and two females and this gender imbalance is reflective of the sports journalism industry (Rowe 2004; Boyle 2006). Live sports blogging is a practice that involves conveying the sporting event but can also include covering developing breaking news stories. Interviews with participants focused on the sporting event because this is a common type of live blogging that is unique to sports journalism. This study acknowledges that digital journalism must operate within technological parameters but is not concerned with the technical detail or computer software involved in live blogging.

The sample was selected through a combination of purposive and snowball techniques. Initial interviews were selected using purposive sampling from the researcher's own industry contacts but developed into a snowball approach with participants then suggesting or recommending further contributors. The original research design involved a cross-section of live bloggers across print, web-specific and broadcast companies in order to establish common or universal themes across the industry. However, two participants worked for more than one employer in a freelance capacity so could not be aligned to one employer. This can be seen as reflective of an industry that has increasingly adopted contingent employment practices (Deuze 2007). The following news organisations were represented: the *BBC*, *Sky Sports*, *The Telegraph*, *Daily Mail*, *The Sun*, *The Guardian* and *livewiresport.com*. *Livewiresport.com* is comprised mainly of former *BBC* journalists who chose to remain in London after the corporation relocated to Manchester. It offers outsourced digital sports media content, with live blogging a key service. High-profile broadcast and sport organizations such as *Channel 4* and football's Premier League have contracted *livewiresport.com* to provide a live blogging service for their online and digital platforms.

The full list of participants is:

Chris Bevan	<i>BBC Sport</i>
Oli Burley	<i>Sky Sports</i>
Caroline Cheese	<i>LiveWire Sport</i>
Daniel Harris	<i>The Guardian</i>
Vicki Hodges	<i>The Telegraph</i>
Jonathan Jurejko	<i>BBC Sport</i>
Jimmy Lloyd	<i>The Sun</i>
Dan Lucas	<i>The Guardian and Telegraph</i>
Dan Ripley	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Rob Smyth	<i>The Guardian and Telegraph</i>

All participants agreed to be named even though anonymity was presented as an option on the consent form, as they were happy to raise awareness and understanding of the live blogging production process. Two participants are former work colleagues of the

author while two others were prior acquaintances in another professional capacity. Seven interviews were conducted in person with one taking place on Skype and two on the phone due to distance and resources. Face-to-face interviews took place in informal settings including work canteens, coffee shops and bars. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour 15 minutes and were audio recorded before being manually transcribed and analysed.

Findings and Discussion

Live sports bloggers are a limited general population and live blogging is not a widespread practice across sports journalism. Live blogging is instead an activity that tends to be practiced by online sports journalists specifically. Nine of the participants identified live blogging as taking place usually in the office with the exception of certain sporting events such as the Wimbledon tennis tournament. One participant performed live blogging from the sporting event on a regular basis. A clear professional ideology emerged across the sample although there were some variations, such as *The Sun* not including user comments with their live blogs, which are mentioned in this section. Also, each live blog tended to be produced by one individual although *BBC Sport* often dedicates small teams.

Four themes emerged that encapsulated the belief and value system of live sports blogging and the categories were labelled in accordance with the language used in the literature review to define professional ideology:

- 1) Objectivity/Subjectivity
- 2) Immediacy
- 3) Public Service
- 4) Editorial autonomy

1) *Objectivity/Subjectivity*

Live sports blogging involved frequent alternation between objectivity and subjectivity. Participants pointed out that this does not represent a new approach to sports journalism, as the combination of facts and opinion is a convention of reporting on sports events. However, participants noted that there had been changes in the nature of subjectivity within sports journalism towards an informal, conversational style and these shifts provided an even starker contrast with the need for objectivity in terms of detachment and impartiality. Jonathan Jurejko of *BBC Sport* described live blogging as, “not a comedy show. It’s a balance between making it informal and fun and chatty and the core journalistic values” (interview, 7 Oct 2014).

Live bloggers recognised the need to provide different information for different audiences. For instance, the objective elements were considered important for the sports fan on the move and accessing a live blog using their mobile device. However, the more subjective elements were perceived as essential provision to a second or third-screen audience where the descriptive function is largely redundant as followers are watching the live sports event on television or online.

A live blogger must simultaneously meet these different audience requirements and expectations. The move towards sports chatter is consistent with previous studies in recent shifts in sports journalism (Sugden and Tomlinson 2010). However, participants prioritised objectivity over subjectivity. “You want opinion and you want colour but sometimes people only want to check the score or goalscorers. You need to give readers that information because people may only be skimming or checking in, reading it for a few minutes” (Vicki Hodges, interview, 4 September 2014). Dan Ripley of the *Mail Online* noted that it was important to, “be as human as possible, project your character, inject humour, make it as lively as possible – but you’ve got to get the details” (interview, 22 May 2014).

Subjectivity was considered to be not always appropriate and live bloggers must demonstrate versatility and speed of thought in being able to switch to more objective reporting at times of crisis, for instance. This requires astute judgement on the part of the live blogger. “You can be bowling along and telling jokes and then all of a sudden someone goes down with a serious head injury. You need to totally switch tone - ‘should I say that? Am I saying the right words?’” (Caroline Cheese, interview, 31 July 2014). The need for judgment is a feature of live blogging identified by Steensen (2011). Live blogs that cover sports events did not pose the challenges of transparency and verification that exist with breaking news blogs (Thurman and Walters 2012; Thorsen 2013).

2) Immediacy

Participants described the need to regularly update the live blog within the space of minutes otherwise the audience would lose interest. There is therefore an expectation that the live blogger is in a state of constant production. The need to meet deadlines is not new to sports journalism but the intense frequency with which they occur in the live blogging process had wider implications for expectations and demands in work routines and culture. Dan Ripley explained that, “you don’t get a break. You are constantly working. If I’m at the point in a runner where I can sit back and talk to someone then something is wrong” (interview, 22 May 2014). Caroline Cheese of *livewiresport.com* argued, “it helps if you can type quickly without too many mistakes. That’s basic but not everyone can” (interview, 31 July 2014).

Live bloggers also need to be able to multi-task because of the multimedia nature of live blogs. Participants described their sources as being snippets of television and radio commentary, tweets, reader e-mails and texts, YouTube clips, statistics and photographs. This multi-tasking added to the complexity and challenge of meeting such frequent deadlines. “You’re essentially concentrating on four or five different things. I always think two live blog hours are worth three or four hours of what you might call normal work” (Smyth, interview, 19 September 2014). Jonathan Jurejko also pointed to the multi-tasking element by saying, “live blogging is a broader beast now of video and audio as well as user-generated comments. It’s not just a text commentary” (interview, 7 October 2014).

The level of intensity of work routines was contingent on the type of sporting event being covered by the live blog. For instance, tennis was considered challenging because of the speed of play and the short breaks between changeovers. However, a slower sport such as cricket was seen as less about intensity and more about longer, energy-sapping work routines that require stamina. Daniel Harris of *The Guardian* made a distinction between different sports by saying, “it’s quite gruelling especially if you’re doing a day of cricket. Tennis is the most intense – you don’t get a proper break” (interview, 27 October 2014).

Participants described how the intensity of live blogging practice through multi-tasking and meeting hyper-deadlines could compromise accuracy. However, participants believe that the audience was accepting of mistakes in a way that would not apply to traditional media because they understood the intensive demands placed on the live blogger. The constant adding of information to the live blog also created transience where mistakes quickly belong to the past although participants would demonstrate transparency and openness in these instances. "If you can't think of a phrase you can just say err... or something like that. Factual errors? Generally, I think the format allows you to get away with that" (Rob Smyth, interview, 19 September 2014). Dan Lucas echoed this by saying, "If you don't see who has made the clearance then you say 'headed clear by random West Brom player' and make a bit of a joke about it" (interview, 20 May 2014). However, it should be emphasised that participants still valued accuracy as important to their professional practice.

3) Public Service

The value of building a community with the audience represented a new development to the public service function of sports journalism. Live sports bloggers perceived their role as mediating discussions that is a finding consistent with Thurman and Walters' (2012) argument. Community building involved selecting comments that prompted or contributed to a discussion and debate. Live sports bloggers were accommodating of insight from the audience and embraced the public's involvement and this attitude differed from Sherwood and Nicholson's (2013) finding that sports journalists believed that they had a monopoly on expertise and that there was distrust towards the public.

Participants also emphasised the need to prompt or stimulate a debate through asking readers for their views to a pertinent question if user comments are not forthcoming. Vicki Hodges of *The Telegraph* stated, "if you can get an argument or some kind of debate within that blog as well then that's how you really hold on to your readers and your audience" (interview, 4 September 2014). However, it was seen as important for live sports bloggers to apply objective elements such as impartiality and fairness. Chris Bevan of *BBC Sport* said, "you always try to be balanced. If there is a penalty or a dive then I would group three together who say 'he's a cheat, this is a disgrace' and three saying the opposite" (interview, 29 July 2014). Caroline Cheese echoed this further still by explaining, "if it was a serious topic, say a disputed penalty, I would definitely try to reflect both sides of the argument" (interview, 31 July 2014). Live bloggers also judged user comments to be of equal value to their own journalistic output. "If there is a sharp and insightful comment and I think 'actually, that is something I hadn't noticed', I'd definitely use that" (Oli Burley, interview, 27 May 2014).

The speed and instantaneity of live blog production also means that user comments must be 'page ready' to be considered for inclusion. Participants adopted a gatekeeping role in that they selected comments but users were not being held to exacting, fastidious and dogmatic professional expectations and standards because of the need for expediency. Dan Ripley pointed out, "you get text speak and sometimes the points are excellent but there's so many numbers, I won't be able to decipher it quickly enough" (interview, 22 May 2014). Dan Lucas endorsed this by saying, "we were doing a live blog when David Moyes got sacked by Manchester United and people have written about 1500 words. I'm doing a live blog – I have no time to read that" (interview, 20 May 2014). Live bloggers' recognition of audience

expertise combined with light-touch selection criteria suggested a flattening of hierarchies between journalists and audiences.

The frequency of user contributions in a live blog can often depend on the nature and status of the sporting event. Live blogging offers a departure from traditional sports journalism in that the production of content continues even if no sport is actually taking place. The live blog is still updated even when there are, for instance, rain breaks in cricket matches and half-time intervals during football games. These breaks in sporting action mean that the live blogger becomes reliant on user-generated comments to provide the informational gaps caused by the fact there is no sport to describe. The live blog still needs to be regularly updated for fear of losing the audience. "The other day I was live blogging a cricket rain break for five hours. Then it was nice to have audience interaction" (Lucas, interview, 20 May 2014).

At times of intense sporting action, participants found that they were concentrating on the descriptive function more than the interactive one. Vicki Hodges identified tennis as an example of this by saying, "if you're blogging on a tennis game then you haven't really got time to go through your e-mails and see what comments are coming in" (interview, 4 September 2014). Participants did not perceive reader contributions to constitute free digital labour or pose ethical dilemmas because they lacked sufficient craft and authorship. Rob Smyth argued, "the way of rationalising it is that they are just such small contributions from people who are very keen to do it and would probably be doing it to their mates anyway. (Comments) are generally reactive and you can imagine they're written in 30 seconds. If they're not going to you they would be going on Twitter anyway" (interview, 19 September 2014). Therefore there was no evidence in this study to support arguments surrounding audience exploitation (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010; Vujnovic 2011).

Non-sports rights holders considered live blogging widely available sporting events – either on free-to-air or pay TV – to be beneficial as it means a shared mediated experience that brings together journalist and user. But non-sports rights holders also perceived live blogging as way of circumventing economic power relationships. Caroline Cheese stated, "if you do have the rights then you can bring in a lot more voices and maybe be at the event. But one of the brilliant arguments for live blogging is that it is a way that a non-rights holder could own a tiny part of an event and be able to say they are covering it" (interview, 31 July 2014).

The notion of community building does not necessarily mean that there is a cozy relationship between journalist and audience. Participants welcomed the audience providing a check and balance on journalism standards. Chris Bevan pointed out, "it is a good way of getting subbed because if you make a mistake then several hundred people will get in touch saying you've picked the wrong player or you've spelled something wrong" (interview, 29 July 2014). Caroline Cheese agreed with this by saying, "if you made a mistake the audience would be on to you. If you get a score the wrong way round, for instance" (interview, 31 July 2014). Daniel Harris pointed to a specific example by saying, "I wrote Gary Naismith instead of Steven Naismith (the Everton soccer player) and I got three or four e-mails and some on Twitter" (interview, 27 October).

The relationship between journalist and audience is not necessarily harmonious, either. The passions and rivalry inherent in sports fandom mean live bloggers face accusations of partisanship that are often expressed in forceful ways. Dan Ripley revealed, "you get abuse. People sometimes accuse you of being biased towards a team that you can't stand. You do need a thick skin" (interview, 22 May 2014). Rob Smyth added, "you do

get some pretty nasty abuse. I got called a paedophile once” (interview, 9 September 2014). One participant did not use audience contributions in the live blog. Jimmy Lloyd of *The Sun* revealed, “we don’t use user comments and I find that difficult in a way because you feel like you’re shouting in an empty room. A lot of reader comments are just abusive and not very helpful. From the feedback we get on Twitter, we will just have people calling us names” (interview, 20 June 2014). This study’s findings that verbal abuse is an occupational hazard for live bloggers are in line with previous research into digital interactivity between journalists and users (Singer 2011; Reich 2011).

4) Editorial Autonomy

Participants also described editorial autonomy as being essential to live blogging. While this does not represent a new departure in professional ideology, participants believed it was more achievable in new media contexts rather than online. The autonomy afforded to live blogging beyond stylistic issues was considered to have emerged from a time when news executives’ focus was still on traditional platforms such as newspaper and television. Participants perceived live blogging to be agency led. They pointed to minor influence from senior managers providing the core live blogging ideologies of providing regular updates and a multimedia and interactive experience were met. Chris Bevan of the *BBC* described his experiences as being, “as long as you include the e-mails, tweets, photos you’re not being told to put anything else in. Drive it how you like” (interview, 29 July 2014). Daniel Harris added, “nobody has ever said to me to ‘do it like this, or do it like that’” (interview, 27 October). Vicki Hodges made a distinction between traditional media culture and new media practice by saying, “sports journalism in newspapers it is still quite formulaic whereas the web you are given a platform to be more creative and to allow personalities to grow” (interview, 4 September 2014). This has led to high levels of job satisfaction with Dan Lucas saying, “to write about it in a format that allows the journalist such an unprecedented scope to apply their own personality to the reportage is hard work but fun too” (interview, 20 May 2014).

Live bloggers experienced the influence of senior managers in a wider commercial rather than editorial context. Oli Burley described the cross-promotional environment at Sky Sports by saying, “we now have far more products on offer so in any blog you can find us referencing *Sky Bet*, *Now TV*, *Score Centre* or *Sky Go*” (interview, 27 May 2014). Dan Ripley outlined a similar experience on the *Mail Online* that involved a sponsorship deal with a betting firm by stating, “there are obligations they’d like you to put into the runner to help them promote – *Corals* is one” (interview, 22 May 2014).

Live blogging was seen as a creative process which has empowered online sports journalists to be distinctive and different and to move on from the ‘cut and paste’ culture of the early days of websites when content would be a reproduction of newspaper copy (Bradshaw and Rohumaa 2011). Participants reported that their autonomy has led to feelings of empowerment and job satisfaction.

However, the freedom to choose which sporting event to cover in a live blog depended on access. Rights holders such as *Sky Sports*, *BBC* and *The Sun* newspaper can access any Premier League football match whereas non-rights holders are reliant on the live TV broadcasts made available to the public. Participants working for rights holders perceived this privileged access as an advantage as it provided them with original and unique content. Oli Burley argued, “our remit is to convey a Sky Sports experience that you

only get online, on iPad and on mobile through a blog that you won't get anywhere else. We provide the expert analysis that isn't on television with pictures, video and punditry from the commentary box" (interview, 27 May 2014).

Conclusion

This study found that live bloggers have reimagined how professional ideology relates to a digital environment. This re-interpretation of what objectivity/subjectivity, immediacy, public service and editorial autonomy mean can be attributed to the speed and intensity of work routines, interaction with the audience and shifting consumer cultures involving first, second and third screens. It is hoped that the findings also go some way to making sense of the "ambiguity and confusion" (Hutchins and Rowe 2012, 126) and the "continuity and change" (Boyle 2006, 142; Boyle and Haynes 2009, 283) surrounding sports journalism in the digital age.

The study's outcomes may also provide a signpost to future trajectory as multimedia platforms become increasingly integral to media work. This study discovered that sports journalism has been more flexible and adaptable to digital practices than previous studies have found (Schultz and Sheffer 2007; Sherwood and Nicholson 2013). Participants in this study did not believe that these shifts had meant a dumbing down or compromising of journalistic standards. Instead, the developments were seen as positive steps towards greater inclusiveness and openness that involved flattening hierarchies between journalist and audience.

This development cannot be situated in the 'crusading' function of sports journalism in providing a watchdog on the corridors of power (Rowe 2004). However, the contrasting 'cheerleading' function seems an inadequate concept because live bloggers are much more than providers of trivial sports chatter and information. A conversational style and the danger of making mistakes in a real-time environment invoke similarities with TV sports commentary (Rowe 2004) but a live blogger is trying to do something very different with the format. It can be argued that the live bloggers' public service function has taken the relationship between sports journalism and community/identity formation (Boyle 2006; Sugden and Tomlinson 2010) to another level that is only possible through networked digital communication.

This study does not claim that these shifts are common experiences to all sports journalists or that the changes are necessarily specific to live sports blogging. For instance, sports journalists also interact with audiences over social media such as Twitter (Price, Farrington and Hall 2012). Instead, the professional ideology of sports journalism contains shifting perceptions in a multi-platform media environment consisting of different roles and practices. Furthermore, the findings should not be generalised to all forms of live blogging and similar in-depth studies into the non-sport subject areas identified by Thurman and Walters (2012) could provide further insight.

The study supports the claim that the professional ideology of journalists is becoming more complex in a multimedia environment (Deuze 2007). The need to deliver impartial information and description around a sports event was a priority over the subjective elements. Furthermore, live sports bloggers apply principles of objectivity such as balance and lack of bias in their role as independent mediators of debates and discussions among the audience and this differs from Steensen's (2011) finding that audience interaction leads to a lack of critical distance while easing Deuze's (2005) concern that

inclusivity compromises professional distance. This study's findings were consistent with Thurman and Walters' (2012) claim that live sports blogs involved audience interaction and casual tone. They broadly support Thorsen's (2013) point that journalists are standing alongside their readers but the maintaining of the gatekeeping role in selecting user comments cannot be described as a bottom-up approach (Deuze 2005).

Future research needs to continually probe the professional ideology of sports journalists across different formats and platforms as well as international contexts in an attempt to gain a comprehensive understanding of the changing nature and complexity of a key area of cultural production. This study used a small sample and a single research method through the perspective of live sports bloggers. The perceptions of participants in this study can be further cross-referenced through an analysis of live sports blogs. Another potentially valuable contribution could be to explore the audience perspective and establish motivations behind submitting comments to be included in the live blog. Attitudes of senior editorial decision-makers towards the live blogging process may also add to our knowledge and understanding of organisational relations in digital journalism production.

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