

TITLE PAGE

ARTICLE TITLE: Playing on the same pitch: Attitudes of sports journalists towards fan bloggers

Author name

Simon McEnnis

Affiliation

University of Brighton

Address

School of Sport and Service Management

Hillbrow

Denton Road

Eastbourne

BN20 7SR

Phone no: (Office) 01273 643725 (mobile) 07920 797249

E-mail: s.mcennis@brighton.ac.uk

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to the participants for taking part in this study. Thanks also to the anonymous reviewers for their time and comments. Further thanks to Alan Tomlinson for his wisdom, and Mark Doidge and Daniel Burdsey for the conversations and suggestions.

FUNDING

None

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

I have not gained any financial interest or benefit arising from the direct application of this research

ARTICLE TITLE: Playing on the same pitch: Attitudes of sports journalists towards fan bloggers

Sports journalism's perceived proximity to fandom has posed professional problems relating to status, prestige and standards. Sports journalists are now seeing performative aspects of their occupational practice appropriated by fans using digital platforms. This paper outlines a study that involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with U.K. print sports journalists to explore what fan blogging has meant for their occupational identity. This study found sports journalists did not consider fan bloggers to be a threat to their professional distinctiveness. Bloggers seeking to emulate sports journalism's daily beat routines were seen as conflictive. However, participants considered the occupation to be safeguarded by privileged accreditation to professional sport and access to resources. The study also discovered sports journalists held nuanced attitudes towards bloggers and did not necessarily see them as inferior. Sports journalists saw a value in bloggers with niche, writer-driven interests in providing complementary content to mainstream media. Sports journalists could legitimise blogs through acceptance and adoption while asserting their own cultural dominance. There were positive indications this expansion and diversification of the sports section of print media websites could lead to a range of perspectives and exposure of marginal voices. Participants also indicated blogging had become an entry route into the occupation.

KEYWORDS sports journalism; blogging; media; communication; print; digital; occupation; Web 2.0

Introduction

Sports journalists have a rather dubious reputation as 'cheerleaders', 'fans with typewriters' and the 'toy department' (Rowe 2004; Boyle 2006). Previous research has claimed that core journalistic principles of objectivity and neutrality give way on the sports desk to subjectivity and partisanship on matters considered to be of trivial interest (Rudin and Ibbotson 2003; Rowe 2004; Boyle 2006; Hutchins and Rowe 2012). Furthermore, sports journalists are considered to take an uncritical and unquestioning stance towards the professional sports environment while building a collusive and complicit relationship with sources (Rowe, 2004; Boyle 2006; Sugden and Tomlinson 2007).

Sports journalists' proximity to fandom can be considered to be increasingly problematic in the 21st century as 'fans with typewriters' in the literal sense are a common feature of the sport communication process through blogs. Print sports journalists are considered to still be "key cultural narrators" despite declining newspaper circulations and the economic primacy of broadcast media (Boyle, Rowe, and Whannel 2009, 252). Historically, journalists have experienced a dominant and hegemonic position in sports culture that derives from the mass media's monopoly control over communication channels. However, external agents such as clubs, organisations, athletes and fans are all now producers and distributors of sports content (Hutchins and Rowe 2012). Blogging is an example of 'digital plenitude' around sports information that has contributed to journalism becoming a 'leaking

craft' (Hutchins and Rowe 2009, 2012). How sports journalists make sense of these shifts can provide insight into how mainstream, legacy media attempts to sustain its hegemonic dominance in a digital environment.

Blogging has involved an adoption of performative norms and codes that have been the domain of the professional culture of sports journalism (Kian, Burden Jnr, and Shaw 2011; McCarthy 2012, 2014). Fans, the traditional consumers of sports texts, are also 'playing on the same pitch' as journalists through shared use of platforms across digital and social media. Fan bloggers engage in journalistic activity yet do not consider themselves to be journalists. They "appear to take their communicative cues from print sports journalism" (McCarthy 2012, 429) while self-identifying as non-mainstream journalists (Kian, Burden Jnr, and Shaw 2011). A growing research culture into sports blogs has emerged (Dart 2009; Kian, Burden Jr, and Shaw 2011; McCarthy 2012, 2014) but there is scant in-depth analysis of the perspective of traditional media gatekeepers, specifically print sports journalists.

Sports journalists, along with the wider newsroom, have experienced considerable upheaval to working practices in the transition of newspapers from analogue to digital platforms (Sherwood and Nicholson 2012; Ketterer, McGuire, and Murray 2014; McGuire and Murray 2013). However, these shifts also pose questions for identity (Reed 2013; McEnnis 2013). Journalists, as a dominant group, are forced to make sense of not only the presence of subordinate agencies such as clubs, fans and organisations in sports communication but also the fact their professional values, norms and practices have been adopted by 'outsiders' to the occupational group. This article outlines a study that focused on how U.K. journalists in mainstream media are making sense of fan-led interventions in sports communication through blogging. Hutchins and Rowe state that sports journalism's "once relatively robust habitus....has turned fragile and permeable" (2012, 150) as the difference between professionals and amateurs has become increasingly problematic.

This research sought to provide clarity on how sports journalists are making sense of these complexities and what they mean for their occupational identity. Particular consideration was given to how sports journalists interpret their distinctiveness and whether they seek to assert hegemonic dominance in their responses, relationships and interactions with bloggers. The study used in-depth semi-structured interviews with a small sample of seven sports journalists working for national, mainstream print media in the U.K. to facilitate concentrated and detailed insight into the research problem.

Sports Journalists and Occupational Identity

This problematic relationship that sports journalists have with their occupational identity and the inherent contradictions within the profession need unpacking. Sports journalism is considered as belonging to the print tradition despite the emergence of the broadcast sports journalist in the late 20th century (Rowe 2004; Boyle 2006). Journalism does not conform to standard notions of professionalism based around training and certification as requirements of entry (Reed 2013). Sports journalists may be hired for their backgrounds in training, work with fanzines, level of sporting knowledge, access to contacts and previous careers

as professional sportspeople (Rowe 2004; Boyle 2006). Boyle (2006) also notes a growing 'graduatisation' of the profession due to the emergence of sports journalism degree courses in the U.K. Rowe (2004) argues sports journalism's difficulty in establishing a clearly defined entry route, allied to the internal battles for legitimacy and authority that have ensued, have contributed to its lowly prestige and status.

Paradoxically, sports journalists wield considerable economic power because they attract considerable audiences to media products yet suffer from low cultural power (Rowe 2004; Boyle 2006). Sports journalists' failure to meet expected standards of professionalism is a primary source of anxiety among them (Salwen and Garrison 1998). Sports journalists are beholden to similar expectations to the wider newsroom largely due to its historically entwined relationship. Sports journalism was absorbed into generalist newspapers in the 19th century and a specialist sports press struggled to sustain itself in the U.K. (Boyle and Haynes 2009).

Sports journalists' privileged position in society has stemmed from its accreditation to the wider professional sports environment. The beat system is an essential feature of sport journalism's professional culture built around the "myth of access to the inside story" (Boyle 2013, 95). Reporters are expected to be able to develop and cultivate contacts within the wider sports environment for the purpose of uncovering information (Lowes 1999). This organisation of news work leads to a favouring of official sources (Lowes 1999; McChesney 2008). The beat system serves an ideological function in that it ensures interest in sport as a commodity by audiences/consumers is maintained on a daily basis (Lowes 1999).

Sports journalists' source relations within this promotional culture are considered to lack professional distance and be defined by collusive activity. Here, reporters' loyalties reside with insiders rather than the public (Sugden and Tomlinson 2007). Sports journalists also form a curious 'press pack' whereby they are colleagues and rivals so therefore both camaraderie and competition exist (Boyle 2006; Sugden and Tomlinson 2007). Favourable access is granted to either those who own rights, such as broadcasters, and those journalists who provide positive coverage or self-censor (Salwen and Garrison 1998; Sugden and Tomlinson 2007). The beat system also operates as a closed shop based around accreditation controlled by media managers. Access is biased towards traditional media, although there are signs newer outlets are starting to gain entry to the wider sports environment (Suggs Jr 2015).

Sports journalism saw its function of describing the sports event usurped by the advent of broadcast media which led to a schism towards either more reflective, contextual writing or gossip and celebrity churnalism (Boyle 2006; Boyle and Haynes 2009; Hutchins and Rowe 2012). Generalisations around sports journalism principles and practice are therefore problematic because of internal struggles for legitimacy.

The print tradition can be divided into two typologies – the 'quality' broadsheet with its emphasis on sport writing and the 'hack' tabloid with its focus on sport reporting (Rowe 2004; Boyle 2006). These two distinctions are sites of tension over journalistic values. Tabloid reporters value speed and economy, and believe that broadsheet writers consider them inferior. On the other hand, the broadsheet writer strives for stories of literary merit and that contextualise sport's relationship with society. These typologies are evidenced in the broadsheet emphasis on cricket and rugby union and the tabloid obsession with football. Rowe notes "the assertion

of the quality writing function over and against that of 'hack' journalism is constantly made by those who wish to elevate media sports texts...to the status of art" (2004, 61).

Sports journalists' occupational status is further impacted by the increasing shift towards what Eco (1986) describes as 'sports chatter' at a time when there has never been a greater need to scrutinise a highly commercialised wider sports environment (Boyle 2013). Sugden and Tomlinson (2010) note increased comment and opinion as one of the consequences of a 24-hour rolling news culture. There can also be a discrepancy between sports journalists' perception of their work routines and what appears in their output. Sheffer and Schultz's (2010a, 2010b) content analysis revealed that sport journalists primarily use Twitter for commentary and opinion despite the self-perception that they mainly posted breaking news and promotion on the social media site.

Sports Blogging

Sports blogs are part of a wider internet phenomenon that encompasses other subject areas such as business and politics. Blogging is considered to have become a common activity by the turn of the 21st century (Kian, Burden Jnr, and Shaw 2011). Barriers of entry to media production have been lifted by access to cheap technology and digital networks facilitated by the user-friendliness of blog-creation sites including blogger.com (Walker Rettberg 2014). Hendrickson advises that "some defining characteristics should be identified if analysis is to be of any use" (2007, 188). Blogs share basic, structural commonalities such as postings in reverse chronological order, hyperlinks and a facility for reader comments (Herring et al. 2005; Lenhart and Fox 2006).

The number of blogs worldwide was reported to have risen from 36 million in 2006 to 181 million in 2011 (Nielsen Wire 2012). Sysomos' (2010) analysis of 100million blog posts found the U.K. (6.75%) to be the second most populated country within the blogosphere behind the U.S. (29.2%). Blogs are difficult to quantify through their existence across disparate online spaces and a lack of a central repository, while being constantly created, abandoned and used for spamming purposes (Walker Rettberg 2014). Rampton's (2012) survey of 1,000 U.S. bloggers discovered Wordpress (43%) was the most popular platform followed by Blogger (35%), Tumblr/TypePad/Posterous (16%) and other (6%). Rampton also found that 329 million people in the U.S. view a blog and 25 billion pages were viewed per month.

Directories and aggregators for sports blogs tend to rely on submissions for inclusion (footballblogdirectory.co.uk, sportsblogsdirectory.com) or use the website operator's discretion (soccerblogs.net) rather than strive for completism. Further, the process of filtering fan blogs from other types of sports blogs, such as athlete and journalist, as well as by country of origin is problematic in internet searches. Little is known about the history and scale of sports blogging in the U.K. U.S. studies, however, can give an indication of popularity and demography around sports blogs. Sports bloggers are considered to be overwhelmingly male and mainly under the age of 30 in the U.S. (Kian, Burden Jnr, and Shaw 2011) when the overall blogosphere is reported to contain balanced gender distribution (Sysomos, 2010). Thirteen per cent

of hobbyist bloggers concentrate on sport as subject matter (Technorati, 2011) while Lenhart and Fox's (2006) research into U.S. bloggers found sports (6%) was the fourth most popular type behind life and experiences (37%), politics/government (11%) and entertainment (7%). Limited attempts have been made by the mainstream media to accommodate fan blogs in their output. *The Guardian* has a revenue-sharing model, called the *Guardian Sports Network*, whereby 25 selected fan bloggers contribute posts to the website. The blogger therefore has the potential of reaching *The Guardian's* mass readership while the media organisation are provided with content. However, *The Guardian Sports Network* model is unique within the U.K. print media market.

Sports blogging has attracted scholarly interest in terms of the questions that it poses for mainstream media (Kian, Burden Jnr, and Shaw 2011; Hardin and Ash 2011; McCarthy 2012, 2014). These key issues can be described as in what ways sports blogging constitute journalism and if bloggers can be considered as belonging to the occupational group of sports journalism. Questions also involve whether sports blogging contests or complements mainstream media.

Blogs can be interpreted as constituting a form of journalism in frequently adopting its normative and performative features including news, opinion and commentary (Hendrickson 2007). In the context of sports, bloggers adopt journalistic conventions, forms and styles such as match reports, analysis, opinion, previews, headlines and photos (McCarthy 2012). However, this similarity does not mean bloggers share the same professional concerns or self-identify with sport journalists as an occupational group even though they consider their work to be a form of sports journalism (Kian, Burden Jnr, and Shaw 2011; McCarthy 2014). Furthermore, bloggers may be motivated by a desire to socially interact with other like-minded bloggers and connect knowledge rather than strive for inclusion and acceptance in the mainstream media (Singer 2006; McCarthy 2012).

Other research has considered in what way bloggers provide competition to journalists. Journalists can view blogs as lacking rigour in terms of accuracy and fact-checking (Lowrey and Mackay 2008). Hardin and Ash (2011), using a content analysis, compared standards and found sports journalists are more likely to place their stories in social context compared to bloggers. However, bloggers can potentially spur the mainstream media to improve its professional standards (Wall 2005; Lowrey 2006). Sports bloggers can also contest mainstream media by offering a dissenting voice (Sanderson 2009; McCarthy 2014). In this context, blogging must be seen as a political act concerned with fans reclaiming sport from the media-sport nexus that drives narratives and determines what is visible and invisible (McCarthy 2014).

Blogging has also been interpreted as a complementary sports communication process to mainstream media. Motivations can stem from dissatisfaction with the coverage of a particular sport or issue and blogs may be used to fill a gap in the sparse coverage of niche sports such as gymnastics (McCarthy 2012). Bloggers can also present news information that has been overlooked by journalists (Lowrey 2006). Singer (2006) argues that journalism and blogging co-exist and have developed an interdependent relationship. Bloggers can provide journalists with a source for stories but also formulate their opinions based on stories that appear in the mainstream media. Furthermore, bloggers rely on journalists to give

them publicity to generate both awareness and audiences. However, Lowrey points out “the argument that blogging and journalism are not in conflict but should rather complement each other serves journalism” (2006, 491).

Sports blogging can be considered to have its antecedents in fanzines. Like blogging, the growth of fanzine culture in 1970s and 1980s arose out of technological shifts. The fanzine sub-culture, of producing underground, subversive publications, exploded in the 1980s because of access to printing technology such as word processors and home computers (Haynes 1995). Many fanzines were driven by enthusiasm and passion for football but also expressed dissatisfaction with mainstream media as they “railed against...the irresponsibility and sensationalism of the press” (Haynes 1995, 36). Fanzine culture can also be interpreted as a response to the perceived promotional culture of mainstream media (Rowe 1992, 1995). Research into journalist attitudes towards fanzines found a more positive reception from editors, who commission material, than reporters, who saw them as competition and cheaper entry routes into mainstream media (Rowe 1995).

Sports journalists occupy a self-perception of having superior knowledge to fans (Sherwood and Nicholson 2012) but also need to ‘raise their game’ in the digital age because “advances in digital technology make it easy for anyone to exercise many of the functions of the journalist from their own PC” (Lambert 2012, 33). McEnnis (2013) notes that sports journalists recognise the difficulty in asserting authority because fans are increasingly better informed due to greater and easier access to information over the Internet. Sports journalists are reflecting on what constitutes professional distinction and worthiness because of the challenge of sharing content and publishing platforms with users (McEnnis 2013).

The blogosphere – and indeed the distinction between amateur and professional – is further complicated and obscured by the fact that journalists can also be bloggers. Schultz and Sheffer (2007) discovered that sport journalists are reluctant bloggers, as they do not recognise its value, apply traditional attitudes and blog because they are told to do so by managers. Dart (2009) found the sports-media complex appropriated blogging with its alternative format providing appeal. Journalists posed as fan bloggers at the 2006 football World Cup finals to ensure that dominant narratives were sustained and alternative voices restricted to the margins (Dart 2009). Lowrey (2006) argues that journalism as a dominant occupational group is showing signs of absorbing blogging as a subordinate practice.

The terms ‘blogging’ and ‘blogger’ can also be used as distancing labels from journalism that serves commercial interests. The labels suggest an alternative and edgy sports journalism that carries with it a cultural cool and cache (Vogan and Dowling 2016). However, they can also be conveniently described as forms of personal expression by sports organisations and leagues as a means of protecting the exclusivity of content and therefore maintain the high value of rights deals with mainstream media (Hutchins and Mikosza 2010).

Methodology

This study analysed the attitudes of print sports journalists towards bloggers and formed part of a wider project that investigated challenges for the occupational group in the digital age. Eligible participants for the study were sports journalists

working for national print organisations in the U.K. The term 'print' alludes to titles that were traditional newspapers but now either partly or, in the case of *The Independent*, wholly publishes content on digital platforms. Sports journalists employed on either a permanent staff contract or regular freelance basis were invited to take part in the study. Previous research has shown that using interviews can prove effective in providing detailed and rich insight into the attitudes and experiences of sports journalists (Cramer 1994; Rowe 2004; Boyle 2006; Hardin and Shain 2005, 2006; Kian 2007; Billings 2009; Hutchins 2011).

The following research questions were determined:

RQ1: What are the mainstream sport journalists' experiences of bloggers in their work routines?

RQ2: How do mainstream sport journalists perceive blogging in relation to their own professional principles and occupational practices?

RQ3: In what ways do sport journalists utilise blogs and bloggers in the mainstream media?

The following seven sports journalists took part in the study:

- **Sean Ingle**, senior sports writer, *The Guardian*. Athletics correspondent and former sports editor of *guardian.co.uk*. Sean is also a regular contributor to the *Guardian Football Weekly* podcast. Started his career with magazine publisher EMAP. Aged 40. Interview took place on 19 January, 2016.
- **Justin Allen**, sports reporter, *The Sun*. General reporting duties covering football. Started journalism career on local newspapers at the *Kent Messenger*. Aged 39. Interview took place on 18 January, 2016.
- **Paul Campbell**, sport community co-ordinator editor, *The Guardian*. Mainly an editorial decision maker but role also includes writing, maintaining social media accounts and overseeing user engagement on the sports section of *guardian.co.uk*. Formerly worked for the leading fanzine *When Saturday Comes*. Aged 32. Interview took place on 13 May, 2016.
- **Nick Szczepanik**, freelance sports writer, *The Independent*, *Daily Telegraph* and *The Times*. General reporting duties covering football, tennis and gridiron. Former staff sports writer for *The Times* between 1999 and 2010. Started career as a teacher before moving into sports journalism in 1994. Aged 62. Interview took place on 25 May, 2016.
- **Dave Bromage**, deputy sports editor, *The Sun*. Duties include editorial decision making and managing production. Started on local newspapers in Hertfordshire before joining *The Sun* early in his career. Aged 37. Interview took place on 9 June, 2016.
- **Tom Hopkinson**, football reporter, *Sunday People*. General reporting duties. Also contributes to *BT Sport's Football Writers* podcast. Previously worked for *Sunday Express*, *Daily Express* and the *London Evening Standard*. Aged 39. Interview took place on 20 July, 2016.
- **Jonathan Wilson**, freelance sports journalist, *The Guardian* and *The Independent*. General reporting duties covering football while specialising in tactics. Former football correspondent for the *Financial Times*. Has authored

five books including *Inverting the Pyramid*, which won the Football Book of the Year award in 2009. Also runs a journal called *The Blizzard*, which publishes long-form sports journalism. Aged 39. Interview took place on 19 January, 2016.

A small sample was selected to enable an in-depth analysis of the perceptions and attitudes of print sports journalists. The sample contained a mixture of 'beat' reporters and editorial decision makers within mainstream media organisations. These two dimensions to the sports desk are common to previous studies that have involved in-depth interviews with sports journalists (Boyle 2006; Sugden and Tomlinson 2007, 2010; Hutchins and Rowe 2012).

A purposive sampling method was initially employed which transitioned to a snowballing technique based on recommendations from initial participants. The typologies of sports journalism was reflected in the final sample with four participants coming from the broadsheet tradition and three interviewees attached to the tabloid, popular press. The final sample was indicative of sport journalism's status as a male-dominated profession (Boyle 2006; Franks and O'Neill 2016). Sports blogging is considered to be an activity more popular among males than females (Lenhart and Fox 2006). Kian, Burden, and Burden Jnr's 2011 study into sports bloggers contained a sample of eight participants, of which seven were male.

The researcher and author of this article is a former sports journalist who worked for a tabloid, national newspaper for nine years. The researcher's sports journalism experience informed the interpretive approach and helped to guide participants in reflecting on their occupational principles and practices. Four of the participants were already known in a professional context (Justin Allen, Dave Bromage, Sean Ingle and Tom Hopkinson), one participant contributed to a previous study (Nick Szczepanik), and contributors recommended two further participants (Paul Campbell and Jonathan Wilson).

Interviews took place between January and July 2016 in person in either staff canteens, bars, restaurants or cafes and lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour and 15 minutes. Participants were presented with the opportunity to be anonymous but all gave consent to be named. Interviews were recorded with a digital audio device and manually transcribed.

Findings and Discussion

Two broad themes emerged from the findings that represented the different aspects of participants' attitudes towards bloggers. These categories were labelled as *competitive* and *complementary* and reflected the key thematic areas that emerged in the interviews and which conveniently linked back to the issues identified in the literature review. *Competitive* related to discussions on situations where bloggers were seen as clashing with sports journalists' occupational practice. *Complementary* was reflective of conditions in which participants were accepting and accommodating of blogging activity.

Competitive

Participants spoke about bloggers who focused on newsgathering, opinion and gossip around the professional sports environment in competitive terms. Here, discussions were concentrated on the importance of privileged access to the inside sports environment in distinguishing between professional journalists and fan bloggers. Interviewees considered that their privileged access to sports insiders, for example athletes and coaches, led to knowledge production that was not generally available to fan bloggers. This ideological outlook reinforced the value that journalists place on official sources and commercial, professional sport (Lowes 1999; McChesney 2008). However, this finding also highlighted the sense of ownership of controlled spaces such as press conferences and mixed zones. Reporters may experience difficult relationships with media managers yet this collusive dynamic helps the print media to safeguard its occupational base.

Respondents considered the availability of resources – specifically time and money – as also leading to the generation of knowledge that was not usually accessible to fan bloggers. Nick Szczepanik, freelance journalist with *The Independent*, *Daily Telegraph* and *The Times*, said:

That's not to say that online journalists can't get things right and sometimes there are people out there who know more than we do. Some people are really solidly into their club and do have their contacts and can get a better story than a Fleet Street journalist. Generally speaking, I know whom my money is on because that's the way it works. The more time you give to something and the more you are paid to get it right, the more incentive you have.

Sean Ingle, senior sports writer with *The Guardian*, referred to athletics bloggers when he stated, "some are knowledgeable and others think everyone is on drugs. I know a lot more than them. I'm speaking to agents and I know more stuff". Tom Hopkinson, football writer with the *Sunday People*, pointed to experience when he said, "when you've been a reporter for 10, 15, 20 years, you've got better contacts".

Participants found that bloggers were not usually present on the 'beat' because of the difficulties in securing accreditation from media managers. Jonathan Wilson, freelance sports journalist for *The Guardian* and *The Independent*, indicated that, "they just don't get in. Data cards are hard to get which is a good thing on the inside". Bloggers who were able to gain access could be considered an undesirable presence. Justin Allen, sports reporter with *The Sun*, was referring to both bloggers and journalists from non-mainstream media when he stated, "they really mess up your press conferences. They come up with an absolutely ridiculous question. A question that's maybe been answered already, or something that's not in relation to anything".

This sports journalist attributed the lack of interviewing skills as being due to either lack of professional training or experience. However, this intervention could also disrupt the 'press pack's' attempts to work together in gaining newsworthy information from the media briefing (Sugden and Tomlinson 2007). Justin Allen also said, "it breaks up the flow of the press conference and the manager might be

thinking for a minute about that stupid question they've had and you're trying to ask a proper question". Justin Allen pointed out bloggers were more than likely to sit in the corner of the press conference room and be content to take notes from answers deriving from questions posed by journalists working for mainstream media.

One sports journalist reported a general suspicion among the 'press pack' towards unfamiliar faces at conferences and briefings. However, acceptance could be gained if bloggers abide by what Sugden and Tomlinson (2007) refer to as 'reciprocal relations' between reporters covering the same beat. Sports journalists work in a paradoxical environment of collaboration and competition with each other. Sugden and Tomlinson (2007) noted that reporters working for rival publications share information and, here, this practice was linked to acceptance within the beat environment. A culture of co-operation linked to acceptance was indicated by Nick Szczepanik who said, "people are always willing to give everyone a chance as long as they are prepared to muck in and share transcribing of quotes".

Participants were sceptical of bloggers who derived their information from the mediated sporting spectacle because they were not able to gain access to the professional sports environment. Nick Szczepanik stated:

I was talking to someone who went to an awards ceremony and he met someone who was up for an award as online journalist of the year. He said 'I'm sorry, I don't know your name?' He was just a blogger. He said 'I only write about Manchester United, I never go to press conferences'. Somehow it makes your thoughts impure. Well, is that journalism or is it stream of consciousness, off-the-top-of-your-head stuff? With press conferences – it's not always what you get taking notes down. It's also being at training grounds, security people at the gates, gossip chat, a few indiscreet remarks and talking to other journalists.

Another sports journalist reinforced this sense of a hierarchy of knowledge delineated by access/non-access by stating, "it's really easy to underestimate how regularly being at matches – how much extra knowledge and perspective that gives you. The little details you glean, hearing questions other people ask. If you're at home watching telly, you don't get that" (Wilson). Tom Hopkinson, of the *Sunday People*, said, "they (bloggers) are not necessarily at games, they're just watching it (sport) on telly or just reading everything they can and giving their opinions on it without having built those relationships". Tom Hopkinson also pointed to bloggers' lack of accountability because they are not answerable to sports insiders if their stories or claims are inaccurate,

If I write something, I have to be mindful that I could be sitting in the front row of their press conference...I'm in the firing line. With bloggers, there's no right of reply. None of us on the road will mind if we get picked out in a mixed zone and told 'you wrote this about me, it's not true'. We give it so we have to take it.

Participants recognised that bloggers could access the professional sports environment, particularly outside of football, but these were exceptions rather than

the norm. Dave Bromage, assistant sports editor with *The Sun*, said, “I know a few athletics bloggers and they don’t have a wide reach but they know what they are talking about”. Tom Hopkinson said, “you might be lucky, your uncle might be a manager somewhere”.

Interviewees also pointed out that blogs could be a useful journalistic tool or contact (Singer 2006). Dave Bromage perceived bloggers as a useful source of stories by saying about his reporting staff, “most of them follow blogs. Blogs are essentially a tweet times 100 – social media can be described as journalism in some perverse way. Journalists need to be across blogs in the same way as social media “. Justin Allen said, “If they’ve got a good interview, you’re thinking ‘yeah, it would be good to talk to that bloke’. You’ve got to look at all avenues in gaining access”.

One sports journalist connected blogging to the general uncertainty around the future of journalism. Fears were expressed that a decline in sport journalists and rise in blogging could lead to lack of critical enquiry. Nick Szczepanik added:

The danger is as newspapers and ‘professional’ operations fade away or go under, tide of free content. Is it going to be more and more bloggers who give you their opinion? Or are swallowing club lines because they haven’t got the resources or the experience to go out there and spend the whole day outside Carrington¹ or are chasing up contacts and leads to get the real story.

Complementary

Participants also spoke of bloggers who had developed specialist, focused and sometimes offbeat interests that supplemented rather than competed with print sports journalism’s core professional routines. These blogs tended to involve in-depth analysis of niche issues that were considered by the print media to be able to attract and drive audiences. Respondents clearly identified how fan bloggers could complement rather than conflict with professional journalism. Sean Ingle said:

In the U.K. we think much more about stories, news and inevitably the people with contacts and access are going to have those stories. The bloggers are on a smaller niche – talking to other fans, talking about stats or things the mainstream media isn’t doing.

Tom Hopkinson made a clear separation between niche bloggers and newspaper journalists by saying, “they’re looking for the tactics, whereas we’re looking for the mud on boots stories – transfers, training-ground bust-ups, behind-the-scenes stuff”. One participant thought there was an appetite among audiences for, “the slightly quirkier often longer stuff that is in some way attached to the news agenda but also not” (Campbell).

Participants pointed to specific examples of fan bloggers and the nature of these niche blogs. One participant explained, “one of the trends more recently is stats/data journalism” (Ingle). Michael Caley, who provides analytics², and Michael Cox, who writes on tactics³, were cited as examples here. Sean Ingle also argued that it was not just mainstream media who were recruiting more statistics-orientated

bloggers but that “some of them have been signed by clubs – they can see it’s interesting and bring it into their organisation. The best ones have found paid work with another media company or a specialist football blog”. One participant described this genre of sports content as “hipster” (Hopkinson). Sean Ingle thought that U.K. media organisations were less likely to use bloggers than in the U.S. These views reflected Boyle’s work on sports journalism which describes the U.S. tradition as being more expansive, literary and “fixated with statistics” than in the U.K. (2006, 34). Ingle said:

We haven’t really got a British Grantland³. America’s much better at taking people who are bloggers. They are much more datacentric over there because they have sports that lend themselves to it. Also, there is more of a tradition of longer-form journalism. A lovely piece of writing is easier if you are a magazine or U.S. longer-form site that recognises it as part of the genre.

Participants spoke about the selection process involved in admitting fan bloggers into the mainstream media. Three participants referred in particular to the *Guardian Sport Network*. The rationale is for mainstream media to benefit from the audiences and advertising that the blogs attract while the blogger increases their profile by accessing the readership of an established brand.

One participant (Paul Campbell) oversaw the *Guardian Sport Network* as part of his duties as sport community co-ordinator editor of *The Guardian*, while another (Sean Ingle) played a significant role in establishing the concept in 2011. Paul Campbell indicated that he was looking for blogs that offered something different to *The Guardian’s* beat journalists. He said, “sometimes you think ‘that’s a version of this, on the website, it’s already being done better’. Sometimes people want to write about Premier League football and there’s enough of that out there”. Campbell indicated that the adoption of bloggers by mainstream media could create a complexity around identity by stating, “I’d say writer rather than blogger. The term blogger – it’s not that it’s a dirty word, it’s just not a word that I would use. I see them as sports writers, perhaps not professionally”. Furthermore, Campbell described the bloggers as offering a fan’s perspective that supplemented the perceived unbiased views of *The Guardian’s* own sports journalists. He explained:

If we sent a reporter to Manchester United, he has to be objective because that’s his job. A while ago we published a piece written by an Aston Villa fan about their season. We already have a Midlands correspondent but it’s a different perspective. I want both – the professional journalist – who is the neutral guy – and the fan. Some people will read the reporter, some people will read fan, some will read both. If you can provide both these services and they are clearly marked as ‘an Aston Villa fan writes about their relegation fight’, I think there’s a value in that.

However, this expansion of sports content could also give a voice to more alternative discourses. Paul Campbell remarked that, for instance, the *Guardian Sport Network* had used a volunteer’s perspective from the Street Child Games⁵.

One participant presented a view of the *Guardian Sport Network* that indicated traditional media was maintaining its dominance over more subordinate groups (Dart 2009). He described the contributors as “usually fairly trustworthy people, quality is proven. If you can’t beat them, employ them. You bring them in-house or you make them your blogger” (Szczepanik). Sean Ingle indicated that the increasing maturity of blogging as an online practice had meant the mainstream media had now selected the best bloggers. He said, “I honestly think blogs aren’t as big as they were. The best ones have been incorporated into the mainstream”. Another sports journalist working in the tabloid press indicated that this supplementary content would always be less valuable than core newsgathering practices because, “if you want to really drive your website and get those thousands of clicks then it’s the breaking news stories” (Hopkinson).

Participants also spoke about bloggers as entrants to the occupational group. One participant stated, “It is another entry route – you’re putting yourself out there. I’ve never heard of a sports journalist applying for a job by sending in a CV – it’s all there under your byline. People can see what you can do” (Szczepanik). Tom Hopkinson said, “your talent will shine through if you’re insightful or you’re breaking news”. Sean Ingle suggested that more traditional opportunities within the occupational group are in decline and that blogging has emerged to replace them. He said:

There are fewer staff and freelance opportunities now – therefore it’s understandable that if you are young and you want to write then why not have a blog. It’s also understandable that the very best ones, or the ones which have a niche, may be picked up.

Participants also told of their own blogging activities, which reinforced previous studies that have found writing blogs has become part of a journalist’s work routines (Singer 2005; Schultz and Sheffer 2007; Hermida 2009). Tom Hopkinson spoke about blogging for his newspaper’s website as an integral part of his work routines while Dave Bromage told of regular blogging activity with his local newspaper. Freelance sports journalists also saw blogging as another employment opportunity for them. Jonathan Wilson stated that he contributed to non-mainstream media websites including whoscored.com, a predominantly football statistics service.

Conclusion

This study examined print sports journalists’ attitudes towards fan bloggers in relation to their occupational identity. The findings provide greater clarity to how a culturally significant and dominant occupational group is navigating the complexities posed by its norms, values and practices becoming diffuse and porous (Hutchins and Rowe 2012). The study also offers insight into how traditional, mainstream media seek to assert hegemonic dominance of the digital environment. This study focused on fan bloggers because of the key questions posed for sports journalists relating to their perceived low professional standards and proximity to fandom.

The two core findings to this study reflected nuanced attitudes from print sports journalists towards fan bloggers – in competitive and complementary terms – that pointed to the complexity, diversity, size and scale of the blogosphere. This outcome indicates that professional journalists do not necessarily see bloggers as inferior around issues of fact-checking and accuracy (Lowrey and Mackay 2008) while recognising that they can co-exist alongside mainstream media (Singer 2006).

The study found that sports journalists considered their occupational distinctiveness to be intact despite the emergence of fans appropriating their performative norms and practices through blogging on digital platforms. Participants perceived bloggers who emulated the daily beat routines of sports journalists to be problematic. These working practices generally related to newsgathering, opinion and gossip around the commercialised professional sports environment, with football's Premier League a prime example. However, sports journalists' privileged access to insiders and the availability of resources, such as time and money, maintained their professional distinctiveness because it led to sites of knowledge production not generally available to fan bloggers.

Participants considered privileged access to professional sports as helping to provide a valuable distinction from fan bloggers despite often tense and fraught relationships with media managers (Sherwood, Nicholson, and Marjoribanks 2016). Sports journalism's ability to therefore continue to negotiate privileged access with media managers is therefore important to the continued cultural dominance of the occupational group. Fan bloggers who pursued similar work routines to sports journalists were considered competition because they were impinging upon core occupational and ideological practices that news organisations devote considerable labour and financial resources towards (Boyle and Haynes 2009).

The study also found sports journalists recognised certain types of blogs – specifically those with niche, writer-driven interests in areas including statistics or tactics – could complement mainstream media and enhance the sports provision of traditional print organisations. Bloggers with specialised interests enable media organisations to expand and add variation to their sports coverage thus improving the attractiveness of the website to audiences. The *Guardian Sport Network* applied broadsheet principles of quality writing to their selection of blogs. Print organisations can offer different perspectives in a digital environment that has no spatial restrictions and a seeming insatiable appetite for sports information from audiences.

Here, sports journalists act as gatekeepers and apply their professional values in determining which blogs are legitimised through acceptance by the mainstream media. This process also helps sports journalists to assert their cultural dominance. This finding can also be interpreted as further evidence that sports journalism is resilient and adaptable to technological developments (Rowe 2004; Boyle 2006). There was, however, evidence in this study that alternative, marginalised discourses were being brought into this arena (specifically, the *Guardian Sport Network* featuring an article about the Street Child Games).

Blogging, like fanzine writing before it, was seen as a valid entry route into a profession that is not credentialised and has a history of recruiting staff through informal recruitment processes such as casualisation rather than formal application procedures. Therefore blogs can provide a useful 'shop window' for mainstream

media. Furthermore, the recruitment of bloggers by mainstream media could encourage future activity to be more conformist than contentious.

The research project provides an in-depth insight into how sports journalists are reacting to the challenges posed by fan blogging. However, this study cannot be generalised to all U.K sports journalists due to its small sample and focused on a very specific source of blogs. Furthermore, fan blogging is only one professional issue confronted by sports journalists in the digital age.

Sports journalists' perspectives tended to relate to bloggers who have actively come into contact with mainstream media either by being physically present in the wider sports environment, providing serious competition in the generation of significant audiences, harbouring ambitions to become a sports journalist, or wishing to have their work published by mainstream media with the attendant financial and/or promotional benefits. Bloggers who act as networked communities and do not seek the attention of mainstream media were not among the discussions with participants.

A small sample was selected to generate rich and comprehensive data that enabled detailed exploration of the sports journalist perspective and encourage participants to be fully reflective of their experiences. The study's data was mainly generated from mid-career journalists with participants predominantly aged between 30 and 40. This demographic was the result of a methodological approach that involved purposive and snowball sampling. Future research could make use of a more stratified approach to explore potential generational differences in attitudes among sports journalists towards bloggers.

This study focused on fan bloggers but there is additional scope to explore the potential disruption that non-mainstream, alternative sports journalism websites are causing traditional, legacy media in the U.K. The findings also offer further potential future direction for research that includes how bloggers are employed by organisations beyond the print media. A 'sister' study that reverses this study and explores the experiences of bloggers who provide content for print media would offer further insight into this subject area.

NOTES

1. Manchester United's training ground near the village of Carrington in Greater Manchester.
2. Michael Caley is analytics editor for Howler Magazine, a U.S. publication on football (soccer) and also writes for espnfc.com. His Twitter bio describes him as "bringing baseball stat nerdiness to football".
3. Michael Cox writes about tactics under the moniker of Zonal Marking and regularly contributes to *The Guardian* and *FourFourTwo* magazine. The 'About' section of www.zonalmarking.net cites the 2008 book *Inverting the Pyramid: The History of Football Tactics* as a key influence. This book was written by Jonathan Wilson, who was a participant in this study.
4. Grantland was a U.S. sports website specialising in long-form journalism launched by ESPN in 2011 and was edited by blogger Bill Simmons. The site was named after Grantland Rice, a prominent figure in the American sports

writing literary tradition. ESPN closed the site in October 2015. See Vogan and Dowling (2016).

5. The Street Child Games took place from March 14 to 20 2016 in Rio, Brazil, and served as an Olympics equivalent for homeless children from nine countries.

REFERENCES

- Billings, Andrew. 2009. "Conveying the Olympic Message: NBC Producer and Sportscaster Interviews Regarding the Role of Identity." *Journal of Sports Media* 4 (1): 1-24.
- Boyle, Raymond. 2006. *Sports Journalism: Context and Issues*. London: Sage.
- Boyle, Raymond, and Richard Haynes. 2009. *Power Play*. 2nd ed. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Boyle, Raymond, David Rowe, and Garry Whannel. 2009. "Delight in Trivial Controversy? Questions for Sports Journalism." In *The Routledge Companion to News and Journalism*, edited by Stuart Allan, 245-254. London: Routledge.
- Boyle, Raymond. 2013. "Reflections On Communication and Sport On Journalism and Digital Culture." *Communication & Sport* 1 (1/2): 88-99.
- Cramer, Judith, A. 1994. "Conversations with Women Sports Journalists." In *Women, Media and Sport: Challenging Gender Values*, edited by Pamela Creedon, 159-179. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dart, Jon. 2009. "Blogging the 2006 World Cup Finals." *Sociology of Sport Journal* 26: 107-126.
- Eco, Umberto. 1986. *Faith In Fakes: Travels in Hyperreality*. London: Secker & Warburg.
- Franks, Suzanne, and Deidre O'Neill. 2016. "Women Reporting Sport? Still a Man's Game?" *Journalism* 17 (4): 474-492.
- Hardin, Marie, and Erin Ash. 2011. "Journalists Provide Social Context Missing From Sports Blogs." *Newspaper Research Journal* 32 (2): 20-35.
- Hardin, Marie, and Stacie Shain. 2005. "Female Sports Journalists. Are We There Yet? 'No'." *Newspaper Research Journal* 26 (4): 22-35.
- Hardin, Marie, and Stacie Shain. 2006. "Feeling Much Smaller Than You Know You Are. The Fragmented Professional Identity of Female Sports Journalists." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 23 (4): 332-358.
- Haynes, Richard. 1995. *The Football Imagination: Rise of Football Fanzine Culture*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing.
- Hendrickson, Laura. 2007. "Press Protection in the Blogosphere: Applying a Functional Definition of Press to News Web Logs." In *Blogging, Citizenship and the Future of Media*, edited by Mark Tremayne, 187-205. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Hermida, Alfred. 2009. "The Blogging BBC: Journalism Blogs at 'the World's Most Trusted News Organisation'." *Journalism Practice* 3 (3): 268-284.
- Herring, Susan C., Lois Anne Scheidt, Sabrina Bonus, and Elijah Wright. 2005. "Weblogs as a Bridging Genre." *Information, Technology & People* 18 (2): 142-171.
- Hutchins, Brett. 2011. "The Acceleration of Media Sport Culture: Twitter, Telepresence and Online Messaging." *Information, Communication and Society* 14 (2): 237-257.
- Hutchins, Brett, and Janine Mikosza. 2010. "The Web 2.0 Olympics: Athlete Blogging, Social Networking and Policy Contradictions at the 2008 Beijing Games." *Convergence* 16 (3): 279-297.

- Hutchins, Brett, and David Rowe. 2009. "From Broadcast Scarcity to Digital Plenitude: The Changing Dynamics of the Media Sport Content Economy." *Television & New Media* 10 (4): 354-370.
- Hutchins, Brett, and David Rowe. 2012. *Sport Beyond Television: The Internet, Digital Media and the Rise of Networked Sport*. London: Routledge.
- Ketterer, Stan, John McGuire, and Ray Murray. 2014. "Contrasting Desired Sports Journalism Skills in a Convergent Media Environment." *Communication & Sport* 2 (3): 282-298.
- Kian, Edward M. 2007. Gender in Sports Writing by the Print Media: An Exploratory Examination of Writers' Experiences and Attitudes." *The SMART Journal* 4 (1): 5-26.
- Kian, Edward M., Joe W Burden Jnr, and Stephanie D Shaw. 2011. "Internet Sport Bloggers: Who Are These People and Where Do They Come From?" *Journal of Sport Administration and Supervision* 3 (1): 30-43.
- Lambert, Charlie. (2012) "Why the Press Pack Must Raise Its Game." *British Journalism Review* 23: 32-37.
- Lenhart, Amanda, and Susannah Fox. 2006. "Bloggers: A Portrait of the Internet's New Storytellers." Accessed July 19. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2006/07/19/bloggers/>
- Lowes, Mark Douglas. 1999. *Inside the Sports Pages: Work Routines, Professional Ideologies, and the Manufacture of Sports News*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Lowrey, Wilson. 2006. "Mapping the Journalism-Blogging Relationship." *Journalism* 7 (4): 477-500.
- Lowrey, Wilson, and Jenn Burleson Mackay (2008). "Journalism and Blogging: A Test of Occupational Competition." *Journalism Practice* 2 (1): 64-81.
- McCarthy, Brigid. 2012. "Consuming Sports Media, Producing Sports Media: An Analysis of Two Fan Sports Blogospheres." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 48 (4): 421-434.
- McCarthy, Brigid. 2014. "A Sports Journalism of Their Own: An Investigation into the Motivations, Behaviours, and Media Attitudes of Fan Sports Bloggers." *Communication & Sport* 2 (1): 65-79.
- McChesney, Robert. 2008. *The Political Economy of Media: Enduring Issues, Emerging Dilemmas*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- McEnnis, Simon. 2013. "Raising Our Game: Effects of Citizen Journalism on Twitter for Professional Identity and Working Practices of British Sport Journalists." *International Journal of Sport Communication* 6 (4): 423-433.
- McGuire, John P., and Ray Murray. 2013. "Attitudes of Sport Print Journalists About Developing Electronic Media Skills: A Case Study of Two Major Newspapers." *International Journal of Sport Communication* 6 (4): 464-477.
- Nielsen Wire. 2012. "Buzz in the Blogosphere: Millions More Bloggers and Blog Readers." Accessed September 15. <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2012/buzz-in-the-blogosphere-millions-more-bloggers-and-blog-readers.html>
- Rampton, John. 2012. "Blogging Stats 2012 (Infographic)". Accessed September 15. <https://blogging.org/blog/blogging-stats-2012-infographic/>
- Reed, Sada. 2013. "American Sports Writers' Social Media Use and its Influence on Professionalism." *Journalism Practice* 7 (5): 555-571.
- Rowe, David. 1992. "Modes of Sports Writing." In *Journalism and Popular Culture*, edited by Peter Dahlgren and Colin Sparks, 96-113. London: Sage.
- Rowe, David. 1995. *Popular Cultures: Rock Music, Sport and the Politics of Pleasure*. London: Sage.

- Rowe, David. 2004. *Sport, Culture and the Media*. 2nd ed. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Rudin, Richard, and Trevor Ibbotson. 2003. *Introduction to Journalism: Essential Techniques and Background Knowledge*. Abingdon: Focal Press.
- Salwen, Michael, and Bruce Garrison. 1998. "Finding Their Place in Journalism: Newspaper Sports Journalists' Professional 'Problems'." *Journal of Sport & Social Issues* 22 (1): 88-102.
- Sanderson, Jimmy. 2009. "'Thanks for Fighting the Good Fight': Cultivating Dissent on Blogmaverick.com." *Southern Communication Journal* 74 (4): 390-405.
- Schultz, Brad, and Mary Lou Sheffer. 2007. "Sports Journalists Who Blog Cling To Traditional Values." *Newspaper Research Journal* 28 (4): 62-76.
- Sheffer, Mary Lou, and Brad Schultz. 2010a. "An Exploratory Study of How Twitter is Affecting Sports Journalism." *International Journal of Sport Communication* 3 (2): 226-239.
- Sheffer, Mary Lou, and Brad Schultz. 2010b. "Paradigm Shift or Passing Fad? Twitter and Sports Journalism." *International Journal of Sport Communication* 3 (4): 472-484.
- Sherwood, Merryn, and Matthew Nicholson. 2012. "Web 2.0 Platforms and the Work of Newspaper Sport Journalists." *Journalism* 14 (7): 942-959.
- Sherwood, Merryn, Matthew Nicholson, and Timothy Marjoribanks. 2016. "Access, Agenda Building and Information Subsidies: Media Relations in Professional Sport." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*. doi: 10.1177/1012690216637631.
- Singer, Jane B. 2005. "The Political J-Blogger: 'Normalizing' a New Media Form to Fit Old Norms and Practices." *Journalism* 6 (2): 173-198.
- Singer, Jane B. 2006. "Journalists and News Bloggers: Complements, Contradictions and Challenges." In *Uses of Blogs*, edited by Axel Bruns and Joanne Jacobs, 27-33. Oxford: Peter Lang.
- Sugden, John, and Alan Tomlinson. 2007. "Stories From Planet Football and Sportsworld: Source Relations and Collusion in Sport Journalism." *Journalism Practice* 1 (1): 44-61.
- Sugden, John, and Alan Tomlinson. 2010. "What Beckham Had For Breakfast: The Rolling Menu of 24/7 Sports News." In *The Rise of 24-hour News Television: Global Perspectives*, edited by Justin Lewis and Stephen Cushion, 151-166. Oxford: Peter Lang.
- Suggs Jr, David Welch. 2015. "Tensions in the Press Box: Understanding Relationships Among Sports Media and Source Organizations." *Communication & Sport*. doi: 10.1177/2167479515577191.
- Sysomos. 2010. "Inside Blogger Demographics: Data by Gender, Age, etc." Accessed September 15. <https://sysomos.com/reports/blogger-demographics>
- Technorati. 2011. "The State of the Blogosphere." Accessed October 3. <http://technorati.com/state-of-the-blogosphere-2011/>
- Vogan, Travis, and David Dowling (2016) "Bill Simmons, Grantland.com, and ESPN's Corporate Re-invention of Literary Sports Writing Online." *Convergence* 22 (1): 18-34.
- Walker Rettberg, Jill. 2014. *Blogging*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Wall, Melissa. 2005. "'Blogs of War': Weblogs as News." *Journalism* 6 (2): 153-172.

Word count: 8,640