

Online Abuse, Emotion Work and Sports Journalism

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Abstract

This article generates new insights into the changing profession of journalism. Empirically, we present the findings of 21 interviews with journalists working in the Irish and UK sports beats on their experiences of online abuse. Conceptually, we address the under-theorising of emotions in journalism by extending the utility and entanglement of emotion work and emotional labour. In doing so, we posit future lines of theoretical enquiry about individual and social regulation. Several key discoveries are presented. First, sports journalism is a distinctive profession because significant authentic emotional work is undertaken. This is only accentuated when online abuse occurs. Journalists are deeply affected by this abuse, personally and professionally. Second, online abuse towards sports journalists is now so ubiquitous as to be habitually accepted, and it has obscured the distinction between public and private spaces. Third, in response, sports journalists have been compelled to develop their own emotional strategies, including self-censorship, to cope with and manage online abuse. The findings presented here also pose practical and existential questions about the sustainability of the profession, especially in the absence of formal institutional supports or even an informal code of practice about how to cope with and respond to online abuse.

Key words: Sport; journalism; emotion work; online abuse; self-censorship; regulation; social media

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Introduction

The traditional dichotomy between journalists and ‘the people formerly known as the audience’ (Rosen, 2006) is dissolving. Today, online communication structures enable audiences to directly engage with and respond to journalists. These consumers can circulate media content, publicly discuss it with others and generate news themselves. This so-called ‘democratisation’ of news gives audiences a more active and arguably influential role within media production, consumption, and circulation. However, the process has also contributed to the generation of misinformation, disinformation, fake news and online abuse (Aïmeur et al. 2023). To date, partial answers have been provided to questions about how online abuse has shaped journalists’ professional practices and personal lives and the implications that arise from this. Very little research has focused on the experiences of sports journalists (Kilvington and Price, 2021). This is surprising given that this professional sector is a space in which online abuse is rife (see Burch, Fielding-Lloyd and Hayday, 2023; Kearns et al. 2023; Kilvington, 2021; Kilvington and Price, 2021). Therefore, our research turns the spotlight directly on sports journalists and aims to 1) critically understand the myriad of ways they receive and experience online abuse; 2) what impact it has on journalistic standards and their personal lives; and, 3) how they deal with, and process, such abuse.

Put simply, this paper reports upon the lived experiences of online abuse by sports journalists based in the United Kingdom and Ireland. We define online abuse as any harmful behaviours, including but not limited to hate speech, cyberbullying, trolling, threatening, doxing and stalking, that takes place in digital spaces and is targeted at groups and/or individuals (see also Vigden, Margetts and Harris, 2019). We distinguish online abuse in this way because the forms of unwanted behaviours experienced by sports journalists do not conform easily to the abuse, harassment and hate speech found elsewhere (see, for example, Burch, et al., 2023; Phipps, 2022), which is usually along the lines of gender, race, sexuality, or other demarcations associated with minoritized groups. The paper builds on the extant literature in three ways: 1) empirically, we address blind spots in the research on the complex entanglement of journalism, emotion work and emotional labour by placing sports journalists, a previously overlooked group, at the centre; 2) conceptually, we explore journalists’ experiences of online abuse and the impact of this on their professional lives and authentic selves; 3) practically, we also consider the challenge of better institutional supports and codes of practice and the wider implications that arise from this research. Before providing a brief conceptual underpinning of

emotion work, we shall first outline existing literature exploring online abuse directed towards journalists and sports journalists.

Journalism, sports journalism, and online abuse

Research has begun to explore the problem of online abuse directed at journalists, albeit more slowly than any expansion in the scale of the problem (e.g., Binns, 2017; Adams, 2018; Stahel and Schoen, 2019; Chen, Pain, Chen, Mekelburg, Springer and Troger, 2020; Obermaier, 2023; Miller, 2023). Research has examined how some news journalists have reacted to abusive audience engagement (e.g., Holton, Bélair-Gagnon, Bossio and Molyneux, 2021). These reactions can involve self-limiting behaviours. For example, they have sought to manage or restrict audience engagement with them (e.g., by deleting, blocking, and muting online users, or turning off interactive features) through any tools and reporting methods available on online platforms. They have also consciously limited their own engagement with abusive audiences or users. This takes several forms including perspective-taking to try to minimise the effect of being a target (e.g., rationalising the online user as an unhappy person) and attempts to insert psychological boundaries between them. More rarely, journalists have sought support from authorities in cases of harassment (see, for example, Miller and Lewis, 2022). As a result of this gap, the support of colleagues or managers is a critical buffer for them (e.g., Chen et al., 2020).

The experiences of sports journalists, however, have been neglected in this space. This is a notable omission given that sport is one of the most powerful transfer mechanisms for culture and emotion (Maguire, 1992). Topics covered by sports journalists have distinct emotional and affective themes that differ from other beats (Horky and Stelzner, 2013). Moreover, sports journalists struggle with the burden of being discredited (Schoch and Ohl, 2021) as the ‘toy department’ of newsrooms, and thus the abuse directed against them is often dismissed by authorities. For these reasons, the emotion work of sports journalists extends well beyond the popular idea of emotional labour and its commodification. The emotion work of sports journalists is deeply authentic and reflects distinctive characteristics. Sports journalism is thus a novel and significant research space for exploring the emotion work (Miller, Considine and Garner, 2007) of dealing with online abuse: specifically, the authentic emotions that are invested in online/digital interactions with sports fans who are steadfast and tribal in their fandom.

Sports journalists require impassioned, typically fervent, connections with sports fans and consumers to leverage the emotional highs and lows of sport (see Kilvington and Price, 2021). Unlike Hochschild's (1983) research, which focuses on those inauthentic emotions and emotional management strategies that are a prescribed part of reaching organisational goals, the emotions at work in sports journalism require further refinement, conceptually and empirically. Sport, particularly football, which is the most popular sport worldwide, generates ample triggers for online abuse directed by fans towards players (e.g., Kavanagh, Litchfield and Osborne, 2022), officials (e.g., Mojtahedi, Webb, Leadley and Jones, 2024) and, for present purposes, journalists. With the acceleration of digital communication technologies, and their integration into sports media practices, these triggers have become even more provocative (e.g., Kilvington and Price, 2021). A core feature of contemporary sports journalism is its instantaneous coverage and analysis of emotive events, and the associated engagement with tribal audiences. This is a Janus-faced challenge for professional journalists - both paid staff and freelancers alike. Typically, they must steer a course between two cross cutting axes: on the one hand, being regarded by digital sports consumers and athletes alike as either too lenient or too critical in their coverage and, on the other, being too biased or objective. As one Irish sportswriter said about public reception to some of his searching analyses of athletics: 'when all you have [as a writer] is a fanboy hammer, every sceptic starts to look like a nail' (Dennehy, 2023), especially when sport is subjected by journalists to the same scrutiny as other 'more serious' or 'newsworthy' topics.

The burden of being a discredited profession has begun to change in recent years however considering the ways in which sport is being gradually laid open to 'the political, economic, and social concerns that shaped the rest of the news' (Sparre, 2017: 206). Sports journalists examine topics such as political and economic policy (Conn, 2021), systemic racism (Liew, 2021), and human rights violations (Delaney, 2021). Consequently, Kearns et al. (2023) document something of a 'perfect storm' in terms of a burgeoning toxic culture of abuse in sport. This involves increasingly politicised sporting coverage married with wider technological changes that allow journalists and fans (and other stakeholders) to engage with each other, directly and instantaneously, on shared digital platforms. Academics have begun to document the experiences of various sporting stakeholders (see Kearns et al., 2023), but there is yet scant research on sports journalism. This is a significant omission given that sports journalists often play a central role in discourses that trigger abuse within the sporting ecosystem, for example, through standard reporting of significant incidents or by offering

opinions that challenge normative views (Burch et al. 2023). In this regard, they function as a bridge between athletes, sporting organisations and fans; indeed, some garner social media followership figures that surpass the readership of their employers or even the athletes about whom they report.

Emotion work and sports journalism

Since the publication of Hochschild's (1983) seminal work on emotional labour, the literature in this field has expanded to include organisational emotion, workplace emotions, emotional management, and a widening range of contemporary organisational practices and service industry occupations, such as nursing (Elliott, 2017) and the legal profession (Lively, 2002). Hochschild's conceptual framework is poignant and provides a lens to help make sense of some of the experiences of contemporary sports journalists regarding online abuse. However, because our empirical work captures sports journalists' responses to online abuse in both professional and personal contexts, it is important that we disentangle emotional labour and emotion work and, within this, inauthentic and authentic emotions and related management strategies.

Emotional labour helps us to make sense of the ways in which sports journalists manage or regulate their emotions as part of the job - in doing so, they meet expected organisational standards. Like Hochschild's air hostesses, sports journalists might respond to online abuse by projecting inauthentic emotions such as friendliness via their social media accounts, or a *laissez-faire* attitude in private, both of which are contradictory to their true, authentic feelings. While emotional labour involves the display of *inauthentic* emotions and the various emotional management strategies that ensue, through surface acting or deep acting for example, emotion work is a valuable concept to explore the activation and role of *authentic* emotions in workplace interactions with clients (Miller et al., 2007). In the workplace context, authentic emotions are required to build and preserve productive relationships, for example, and strategies involve the regulation of individual and others' feelings to preserve these. Emotion work might involve elements of surface and deep acting but, crucially, this involves authentic emotional connections which are the required currency for human interaction in this environment. Taken together, emotional labour and emotion work are useful conceptual tools to understand the experiences of sports journalists. These are a group of workers who must engage in, and deal directly with, the display and regulation of *authentic* emotions, including online abuse, daily, and this impacts them, personally and professionally.

Admittedly, audience criticism has predated the rise of social media, such as in cases of angry readers who sent heated (and even abusive) letters to newsprint publications (Campen, 2014). Today, however, sports journalists are expected (see Xia, Robinson, Zahay and Freelon, 2020), if not directed, to engage daily with the public-as-client via online and third-party platforms (i.e., social media), often with relatively light editorial oversight or protections. Online harassment and abuse of journalists is growing, anecdotally, and research cited above reflects the growing scale of this issue, especially abuse directed at women and minoritised groups (Chen et al. 2020; Tandoc, Sagun and Alvarez 2023).

Despite the known similarities in journalists' experiences of general incivility (Chen et al, 2020) and online abuse specifically, few media institutions offer any substantial training on how to interact with participatory and abusive online audiences. Some guidance is available that requires journalists to balance the professional needs and reputation of the organisation when it comes to digital engagement. Still, abusive interactions on anonymous threads are now so frequent as to be a cultural norm (Reader, 2012), and there is also little formal guidance on how journalists might protect their mental health within this context (Martin and Murrell, 2021). The consequences of this have led to informal changes in news journalism practices such as self-censorship (Larsen, Fadnes and Krøvel, 2020) and, in some cases, departures by journalists from the profession (Binns, 2017).

There are open questions then about whether and how these patterns are reflected in the professional subset of sports journalism and how this group might resist formal and informal feeling rules (Bolton and Boyd, 2003) that act to normalise or habituate online abuse as 'part of the job'. Understanding more of their experiences can shed further light on the rise of digital technologies and on the ways in which the emotional turn is shaping the future of sports journalism and journalism more broadly. The emotional demands made of sports journalists are illustrative of those in the wider profession in the digital age. Their role involves work at the sports desk in modern newsrooms and being live 'in the field' before, during, and after sports events. Notably, it is also conducted through second and third screens, i.e., in front of monitors and devices where journalists produce, watch, and edit sports text, videos, and sounds, first- and second-hand, and where they encounter online responses to their work. But sports journalists also experience distinctive emotional demands, yet under-researched and under-theorised. They straddle a tightrope to achieve popularity and status, not to mind 'objectivity' through the eyes of sports fans. They invest their authentic journalistic selves in this work, but

this balancing act involves the suppression of their own emotions, and the deliberate engagement of others', to generate interest online, via open rates of articles, new media posts, and click rates. How sports journalists cope with this is therefore worthy of study. Tandoc et al.'s (2023) investigation of women journalists' experiences of online harassment in the Philippines illustrated the importance of support for journalists, through discussing emotions with peers, organisations, and the public. Meanwhile, Chen et al. (2020), who conducted 75 in-depth interviews with women journalists, reported that their interviewees developed a myriad of coping strategies to deal with abuse, including limiting what they posted online, changing the types of stories on which they reported, and using technological tools to hide abusive messaging on social media platforms. Given the distinctive challenges of working, professionally, in a field that is at once emotionally fraught and yet whose socio-political significance is often overlooked (see Rowe, 2007), it is important then to extend this research to illuminate a context that is largely overlooked today.

Due to the portable nature of social media and smartphones, formal boundaries are being eroded between sports journalists' work and personal lives. It is clear that 'getting the job done' involves distinctive and high levels of emotion work on their part. Arguably, the journalist who is the target of online abuse will find it more difficult to embrace the call for a more open and participatory approach (Xia et al., 2020). With these issues in mind, we sought to explore the experiences of sports journalists concerning online abuse directed at them, and how abuse shaped their professional practices and impacted upon their personal lives.

Research Design

21 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with sports journalists working in the UK and Ireland in 2022. The research project received ethical approval from [Name of University] under approval number [details withheld], which included an interview guide that used question formulations and prompts designed to prevent social desirability and any distortions.¹ Anonymity allowed interviewees to engage in an authentic manner. Care was taken to avoid the use of any suggestive language in our questions that may have led to socially desirable responses concerning online abuse. An indirect questioning structure was also used in which journalists were not asked directly if they experienced abuse. This approach meant

¹ The interview guidelines can be found in the online appendix

they could raise this topic, where they felt comfortable to do so because it was appropriate for them.

The purposive sample (Rubin and Rubin, 1995) included 13 self-identified males and eight self-identified females. Notably, a number of others, including prominent female journalists, declined to participate in this research because they preferred not to revisit the emotional impact of online abuse. All interviews were conducted via Zoom or Microsoft Teams, and transcriptions were anonymised and redacted. The final gender balance is favourable for research purposes and exceeds industry estimates of between one to eight per cent of females in the profession (Franks and O’Neill, 2016; Boczek, Dogruel and Schallhorn, 2023). The final sample size also matches that of comparable studies (e.g., Chen et al., 2020; Obermaier, 2023; Tandoc et al. 2023) and permitted us to achieve code and meaning saturation (Hennink, Kaiser and Marconi, 2017). Journalists who had written or spoken publicly about online abuse in sport in the UK and Ireland were contacted (via email and social media). Others were secured through gatekeeping contacts and personal referrals. The final interview sample includes a range of publication types, such as prominent broadsheet newspapers (e.g., *The Sunday Times*, *The Guardian*), national public service broadcasters (e.g., BBC and RTÉ), and sports and news websites (e.g., The Currency).

All 21 interviewees had experience of managing audience engagement via social media and reporting on football. More than half (n=11) covered this sport exclusively. Eight of the final sample who worked as freelancers also contributed regularly to several high-profile publications and podcasts (e.g., ESPN, Guardian Football Weekly). Table 1 outlines anonymised (pseudonyms) summary information on the sample such as gender, industry experience, age band, paid or freelance status, and type of publication.

Table 1: Research Sample

Pseudonym	M/F	Industry Experience in years	Age	Nationality	Freelance	Employer publication	Sports covered
Alan	M	20-25	40-45	Irish	No	Broadsheet	Football
Brian	M	5-10	30-35	Irish	No	Website	Rugby
Colin	M	25+	45-50	Irish	No	Broadsheet	Football
Dean	M	20-25	40-45	British	Yes	N/A ²	Football
Eddie	M	20-25	40-45	British	No	Website	Football
Frank	M	10-15	35-40	Irish	No	Broadsheet	Football

² Not applicable as they participant is freelance

Gerry	M	20-25	40-45	British	Yes	N/A	Football
Harry	M	20-25	40-45	Irish	Yes	N/A	Football
Izzy	F	25+	55+	British	No	Broadsheet	General sport
Jean	F	20-25	40-45	Irish	No	Broadsheet	Rugby
Katherine	F	0-5	25-30	Irish	No	Broadsheet	General sport
Liam	M	25+	45-50	Irish	No	Website	Football
Micah	M	5-10	30-35	British	No	Website	Football
Norah	F	25+	55+	Irish	Yes	N/A	General sport
Olivia	F	5-10	40-45	British	No	Website	General sport
Peter	M	20-25	40-45	British	Yes	N/A	General sport
Quentin	M	10-15	35-40	British	No	Sports Broadcaster	General sport
Raquel	F	0-5	25-30	Brazilian	Yes	N/A	Football
Steve	M	10-15	35-40	British	Yes	N/A	General sport
Trish	F	15-20	40-45	British	No	Broadcaster	Golf
Una	F	5-10	35-40	Irish	Yes	N/A	Football

The sample was almost evenly split between Irish- and UK-affiliated publications and broadcasters. Nineteen were from a White British/Irish background. This too represents the actual ethnic composition of the profession (Statista, 2021) but prompts a need for the inclusion of minoritised groups in future research. Data analysis was completed using Lindlof and Taylor's (2017) axial coding framework. All researchers reviewed the transcripts and identified first order categories. Following this, a more focused iterative thematic analysis was completed which was guided by ideas around emotion work, presentation of self and self-regulation, and by sport-as-work. Second order themes were then identified and subsequently coded to establish intra-data consistency.

The final interview themes provided insights into changes in the professional roles of sports journalists, their experiences of engagement with social media and digital abuse (either as an observer or target) and the impact of this, personally and professionally speaking. Other emergent themes included organisational cultures and informal practices within media institutions regarding online attacks and abuse.

The findings are outlined next. First, we delineate the types of abuse experienced by these sports journalists. This falls within Vigden, Margetts and Harris's (2019) categorisation and included abuse directed against a specific group and towards individuals, with some overlap between these. Hence, as we argued above, the term 'abuse' is more instructive and appropriate in this empirical context than either 'hate' or 'cyberbullying'. Then we explore the personal and professional impacts of this abuse, by drawing on our conceptual framework, and we consider any institutional responses to this.

Research Findings

Types of abuse – 'Just because my opinion differs to yours, it doesn't mean that I have to die'

Sports journalists identified several topics that appeared to stir up and exacerbate abuse, particularly within the context of football. This included transfer news, reporting on club ownership and/or sportswashing, scandals involving players/athletes, criticism of clubs and/or players'/athletes' performances, and stories pertaining to politically sensitive or heightened topics, such as gender, sexuality, 'race' and ethnicity. The variety of triggering topics ranged from sports minutia to socio-political issues and underlines the context of sports journalism as a notably incendiary one; one in which the professional and political often blur. Journalists encountered abuse mainly through replies to stories, quote tweets, tags, and direct messages and female journalists experienced sexual advances and harassment, sexism and misogyny (see also, Wheatley 2023).

The abuse ranged in format: from being individual, sporadic, and reactionary to more careful coordination of this. All 21 journalists were also aware of peers whose experiences of abuse took a similar format. Their emotional responses to this were layered and did not appear to have any emotional ceiling: ranging from hurt, anger and frustration to helplessness and fear. For the most part, these emotions were triggered after a difference of opinion between the journalist and online sports fan. Many user responses were often inordinate. This was reflected in Micah's view, that 'just because my opinion differs to yours [abusive social media user], it doesn't mean that I have to die'.

Aside from reactionary responses like these, there was also evidence of more coordinated online attacks. This type of coordinated behaviour is observed more generally in how hate groups troll their targets. One example featured engagement between an emotionally exhausted Peter and an anti-trans group.

One of the big anti-trans accounts basically asked me, in a very public way on Twitter, why I was hiding replies on a tweet that I put out and that, of course, just attracted even more. You know, that kind of dog whistle that these accounts will use to rally their followers and then I suppose that tweet then just got completely overtaken by people just posting, you know, replies and comments which completely just became overwhelming.

Other coordinated and more dispersed forms of abuse were also directed at the journalists that involved a herd mentality among social media users. This was exposed when Norah wrote about men's football and experienced an online 'pile on' following her analysis of Lionel Messi, who is widely regarded as one of the greatest male footballers of all time: 'It was a comment I made about Messi and it was like, you know, "what the hell would you know?" Then it started getting quite nasty'. This experience was illustrative of the experiences of female interviewees who attested to their feelings of frustration and weariness when their credentials and knowledge of the game were regularly called into question through a high volume of abusive messages. In this way, online spaces can function as echo chambers in sports media (Kilvington, 2021). The higher level of scrutiny afforded to women who reported on men's football was also observed by another, male, journalist, Colin. He said:

I have one huge advantage in all of this - I am not a woman. As a man, you seem to be able to say the same things and not take anything like the [level of] abuse [directed at female journalists]... it's not just the fact that people disagree with them, it's also the tone involved.

On some occasions, the official X [formerly Twitter] accounts of professional football clubs have been embroiled in the generation and/or amplification of abuse. For example, in 2020, former England international player, Karen Carney, now working as a football analyst for Sky Sports, commented that Leeds United Football Club gained promotion to the English Premier League, in part because the global pandemic was a respite in an otherwise demanding season. Leeds United FC took an 18-second video clip of Carney's remarks and mocked her claim through their official account with a caption that read 'Promoted because of Covid'. This amplification was criticised by other female football analysts, but Leeds did not delete the tweet, instead endorsing its sentiments. This led to waves of online sexist abuse against Carney - she was called 'a silly bitch', 'stupid slag', 'twat of the week' and told to 'get back in the

kitchen’, ‘put your mic down and get yourself home’ and told to ‘get kettle on love’. Carney subsequently deleted her X account and Leeds condemned the abuse directed at her.³ Indicative of the diffused abuse directed at sports journalists generally, one of our interviewees, Gerry, recounted a younger male who had a similar experience:

[Name] is a [characteristic removed to preserve anonymity] ... he wrote an article ahead of [name of match removed] ... I was sat on the train with him coming back and ... he was like, “look at this”, and what had happened was [the opposing club’s official social media account] had linked his article from their own account ... and it unleashed the hordes ... That’s incredibly irresponsible, and the amount of abuse that he got ... was incredible.

Gerry regarded the actions of the football club in question as deliberately provocative because it generated high interest and clicks.

These thick descriptions demonstrate that sports journalists, pundits, and commentators are expected to engage with audiences and to post online content that will absorb them. But they are also in a position where they can expect, if not have to anticipate and ‘second-guess’, the online abuse that is sure to follow. Two consequences of this are a lingering fear of online abuse that has tainted their professional and personal lives, and the need for constant self-regulation of emotions, especially negative ones.

‘There’s a price to pay for being online’ – Impact on Professional Life

Interviewees noted the ways in which online abuse had changed the professional landscape within sports journalism. This mirrored the impact of abuse on quality of output and criticality within the profession generally (e.g., Larsen et al, 2020). Our interviewees focused mainly on the implications for professional criticality, how journalists promote their work, and on the emotionality connected to career progression and job satisfaction. On the theme of professional criticality, Dean and Frank observed how online abuse had directly affected the framing and quality of stories:

³ It should also be acknowledged that sports journalists in our sample received abuse via email and letters (see also, Campen, 2014). In the digital age, Katherine felt that receiving a letter or email was ‘worse in some ways’ because ‘someone was so irate they took the time to sit down and write it’.

I think the sadness of that [online abuse] is people who have let it get to them, who are either sort of second-guessing what the abuse is going to be or sort of defending themselves against it, so they never actually write properly [authentically] (Dean).

Yeah, I know for a fact people will think you should maybe do a piece on that and then “I can’t be arsed because of the reaction it will get”. It will influence your framing of things, how you write things and your description of things (Frank).

This illustrated that the emotion work involved in dealing with abuse had a limiting, chilling and even silencing, impact on sports journalists themselves, in some cases alienating journalists from their own work and productivity. In other cases, it restricted sports journalists from achieving satisfaction and delivering sports output of a requisite professional standard.

Interviewees also illustrated how the pressures of (actual or expected) online abuse shaped work practices. In this context, Micah explained how he now often refrained from posting factually accurate and corroborated football transfer news because his experience, and that of others, was such that any transfer news was particularly inflammatory and attracted online abuse. These, and other examples, showed that journalists had adopted self-imposed limits in their work, even for topics as ‘uncomplicated’ as transfers.

Just calling journalists all the names under the sun when they’ve got a story wrong and when I say the story wrong, it’s something as simple as, you know, a journalist can say that this transfer is going to happen and it doesn’t happen, then the social media mentions are just full of abuse (Micah).

Interviewees said they also avoided more controversial topics and/or those likely to polarise opinion, such as policies on the inclusion of transgender athletes. The emotion work here was substantial in that journalists had to practice self-regulation to survive in the profession. Harry told us that his response to abuse was ‘to kind of drift away from it [social media for work] in general’ and Olivia affirmed that online abuse impacted ‘the way that you promote your stuff and the way that you write’. An added layer of fear and intimidation for her was the very real threat that her actual physical location would be shared online, especially during live coverage of sports events. In her words:

When a journalist who's maybe being targeted by somebody online is doing a Facebook Live, they [online users] will then screengrab the Facebook Live or like kind of take shots of it and share it on their socials to their followers, saying, "she's here doing this right now. Why don't you go and see her?" ... You actually then feel intimidated to go and do a Facebook Live because ... there might be 900 people [followers] of this person that's been harassing and abusing you, coming down to see you.

The emotion work enacted here by the journalists illustrates the informal practices of emotional regulation and professional restraint when covering sport. Journalists felt the need to maintain appearances, uphold professional standards, and continue with stories despite safety concerns. However, the emotional toll connected with online abuse had repercussions for journalists' personal and professional selves. Some troubling implications arise for sports journalism as a profession, which we address later. There were also more immediate career implications for those who chose not to use social media.

Gerry captured the enigma of benefits and costs to having a digital presence. In his words:

It [social media] can be good for your career ... But a couple of colleagues and friends of mine have stepped away from social media. I wouldn't say their careers have flourished [since] because ... being on social media might have presented them with greater opportunities. It certainly has [for] me over the years, and it's a big part of life, but in both cases, they just couldn't deal with the bullshit ... there is a price to pay for being online.

Disengagement from social media also had discernible implications for job satisfaction. The journalists interviewed here continued to engage actively in publishing and promoting their work online, in the knowledge that this would aggravate audiences. Consequently, in doing their jobs according to industry standards, they had to accept the sullyng of their reputations and, in some cases, threats to their job security. One journalist, Frank described, in stark terms, how he 'suddenly had people trawling through my personal Facebook looking for anything to try and get me sacked'. Other interviewees too cited examples of false rumours about them that were deliberately amplified across social media and shared with their employers to undermine their employment status and security.

Given these tangible experiences, the problem cannot be overstated because of the very real consequences for the profession, in terms of recruitment, career progression and retention (see also, Posetti, Aboulez, Bontcheva, Harrison and Waisbord, 2020). It is concerning too that many sports journalists normalised online abuse. All of them recounted examples of its impact on their personal lives. This was accentuated by the role of social media in blurring the distinction between the private and the professional for the journalists targeted by abuse. For sports journalists, the emotional labour of projecting a professional (inauthentic) digital self, unaffected by this abuse, and the deep emotion work around engaging and harnessing authentic audience emotions, and managing their own private emotional responses, bled into one another.

‘It slowly chips away at you’ – Impact on Personal Life

The blurring of public/private spheres is accentuated in the digital age, where we live out our lives in close interdependence with one another. We are yet in the process of learning how to deal with the various problems that demand high discipline among social media users and a uniform and moderate self-regulation (Liston, 2022). The digital dispersal of sports output today, and the emotion work that comes with this, means that it is very difficult for journalists to ‘block out work’, particularly online abuse. Interviewees noted that online interactions and notifications were a near constant feature of their lives, intruding on their leisure time, such as during family holidays or at weekends. This intrusion felt almost inescapable and had demonstrable psychological impacts. In Liam’s words:

Very few people brush off online abuse and it is intrusive and it is personal. You know, when it’s happening or when it’s flaring up because you kind of forget about it and you pick up your phone to do something and you just flick on your Twitter or whatever, and suddenly there’s a whole load of notifications and you’re like, “oh, fuck, I forgot about this”.

The impact of abuse also spread to family and friends. One journalist, Quentin, found this to be the most difficult aspect of his emotion work.

Then my folks see it and my family see it and that’s almost the hardest thing about the abuse ... because I’m used to it and because I shield them from it ... That’s always the hardest thing when your family see the abuse.

Because of these blurred boundaries between public and private spaces, the emotional toll of dealing with online hate was ‘debilitating’ for overall wellbeing. In Frank’s words, ‘there are periods where it just dominates your thinking in a way it shouldn’t and that kind of influences your mood’. For Micah, ‘it slowly chips away at you and, you know, if say in the space of a year I’m going to post 100 stories, every time I get a negative comment, it just chips away’. Within the workplace, sports journalists self-regulate their emotions to portray a ‘business as usual’ demeanour. Within private settings, some note that online abuse cannot be ‘brushed off’ too easily as it ‘dominates your thinking’, especially when family members or friends are aware of it. What then of any individual and institutional level supports that were available to journalists in our study? For the emotional wellbeing of sports journalists is of paramount importance in an industry whereby abuse is rife.

The Balance between Self-Regulation and Institutional Support – ‘Are you okay? Do you want a cup of tea? Let’s have a chat’

There was no prescribed training on emotion management in sports journalism nor was there any formal institutional support for dealing with online abuse. Considering that emotion management is one of the foundations of journalism (Peters, 2011), this absence was noteworthy. As a result, some journalists felt very exposed to abuse and this was especially acute for freelance writers. Based on this, sports journalism is conceivably illuminative of a wider and problematic lacuna in the industry.

The sports journalists interviewed here developed their own emotional and cognitive devices for dealing with online abuse, such as ignoring and/or blocking/muting online users or comments. This required them to consciously self-regulate and perform emotional restraint, i.e., not responding to trolls. These types of coping mechanisms also tallied with those found elsewhere (e.g., Miller and Lewis, 2022). Raquel described this process as follows.

I’ve had that temptation. I know what it’s like to want to just type something back and then press send. But it is the worst idea because it makes them know that they’ve hit a nerve and that they’ve got you. That feeds them, you know, it just feeds them. I’ve got a group of people trolling me and I haven’t blocked them because I need to be able to see what they’re doing against other people because they troll those other people as well.

Thus, even when journalists chose to monitor or ignore trolls, they had to think about ‘how’ to do this. Going ‘on the attack’ usually meant the challenging of views and/or outing online abusers, particularly those who targeted journalists with private messages. Una suggested that ‘if anyone made a direct threat at me and anyone was identifiable, absolutely, I would be owning it up big time and making a show of them’. But 15 of our journalists were explicitly wary of this strategy of exposure given the likely backlash. Journalists also had to act within any institutional parameters around online engagement that required them to think about the organisation first.

Because of this, many felt they could not directly respond to abuse themselves and the question then arose about what other supports were available to them, if any. Most dismissed the potential reporting of the abuse to the police or relevant social media company as a pointless exercise because they felt that nothing meaningful was done in response. Frustrations about this lack of action following formal reports is also noted elsewhere (e.g., Storry and Poppleton, 2022). Consequently, the sports journalists interviewed here drew on private connections and, on any other formal supports available in the broader space of wellbeing. Quentin, a well-established journalist with a prominent profile, highlighted some of these gaps as follows:

I don’t think there’s been any training. I actually don’t think I’ve ever had any training about being, I guess, what you would call a higher profile person within this sphere about how to deal with it [...] So that puts us in a certain position and no, I don’t think anyone’s ever sat down and said, “here is how you deal with trolling/online abuse”. Now with that said, there is an awful lot that goes around about mental health. “If you’re struggling, here is the support that’s available”. I’ve had an awful lot of managers say to me, “Are you okay? Do you want a cup of tea? Let’s have a chat”. So I don’t want to make it seem like there’s no support at all because that’s not the case. We do a lot of training courses, but I don’t think there’s ever been a specifically structured ‘here’s how you deal with trolling abuse that may come your way’.

His experience was shared by most interviewees. Only one journalist reported receiving formal training about online abuse, which he reported to be irrelevant and impractical. Most said that they sought out and were given some form of informal support, such as emotional backing from colleagues or suggestions from management about how to respond to an identifiable spike in levels of online abuse. This support had limitations, however, nor was there any monitoring of the effectiveness of supports. In some organisations, the comments sections for articles were

removed when online abuse was displayed and, in one case, time was spent on educating readers (and journalists) about how to enhance the civility, and hence quality, of below-the-line discussions. This was done to try to pre-empt online abuse, but no evidence was available to confirm its effectiveness.

The perceived lack of meaningful support was frustrating for the 21 interviewees given the pressures they felt were on them to use online platforms for work purposes. Izzy recalled that ‘when Twitter launched, we were sort of told “please have an account, this is a very good way to engage and bring in new readers and let them know who you are”’. Being expected to be accessible online all the time – or ‘reporting 24/7’ as Gerry put this – was perceived to be both unhealthy and an unreasonable institutional/professional expectation. Freelance sports journalists were especially vulnerable to this. Being online was almost unavoidable for them because they relied solely on online channels and platforms to generate exposure about their work and capabilities. Raquel noted that ‘as a freelance journalist, you sort of have to be on Twitter to promote yourself and promote your writing [so] you’re right there and open to attack.’ To secure future opportunities, then, many freelancers sought to push their content as far and as wide as possible (Hayes and Silke, 2018). Thus, the absence of organisational support was even more acute for them when they encountered online abuse.

Having outlined these main findings, the paper now discusses the originality and significance of the research and considers the implications that arise for the future of sports journalism, both as a credible profession that retains criticality and as a sphere of work that can be emotionally fulfilling.

Discussion

It is worth reiterating the research aims of this paper. 1) To critically understand the myriad of ways sports journalists receive and experience online abuse; 2) to understand what impact it has on journalistic standards and their personal lives; and, 3) to understand how sports journalists deal with, and process, such abuse.

Our interview findings generate new empirical insights into online abuse through the lens of sports journalism. The findings illustrate that sports journalists have become habituated to online abuse in the pursuit of their professional endeavours. This abuse can be spontaneous or coordinated, it is mostly received via social media and almost ubiquitous for sports journalists. In response, journalists perform their emotion work using a variety of digital techniques (to

block, mute and so on) and through substantial and ongoing emotional self-regulation. Not only must they suppress their authentic emotions to maintain professionalism – particularly in response to online abuse – but they must also anticipate and engage with this abuse, in the full realisation of real and tangible impacts on their professional and personal lives. Here we see further blurring of emotional labour and emotion work in modern sports journalism, as the round-the-clock demands of covering sport and the inescapability of digital communication, means that journalists are in a continual process of suppression and regulation of emotions across their personal and professional lives.

In this context, individual coping devices are essential. This problem is especially acute however where formal organisational/institutional support is non-existent or deficient, which was largely the case for all 21 interviewees i.e., support was informal, ad hoc and not monitored for effectiveness. Where formal support did exist, it was only available to full time journalists attached to news organisations and usually it was designed for other purposes, mainly for wider mental health/wellbeing. This is often misapplied as an institutional response to online abuse owing, perhaps, to the gaps that exist, internally, between policy pillars that deal with legal, human resource, safeguarding and digital and communications practices. The evidence here points to the use of some peer and informal support networks as a buffer against online abuse (see also, Kantola and Harju, 2023) but more research is required to understand whether co-worker support in beat journalism – politics, economics or sport for instance – may contribute to an inversion of emotional valence in the case of negative events i.e., whether negative emotional displays about online abuse directed at journalists might result in positive individual outcomes for them (see Hadley, 2014;). Irrespective of their status then (whether freelance or paid contract), sports journalists are left largely to their own emotional devices to deal with online abuse.

Notably, our findings attest that sports journalism is a distinctive subset when it comes to emotion work. Apart from the work of Kilvington and Price (2021), this research is the first to set out the slow and potentially corrosive impact of online abuse on sports journalism output. In so doing, it also responds to the noted under-theorising of emotion in journalism research in two ways: by extending the utility of the idea of emotion work to examine authentic emotions, and by highlighting the individual self-regulation required to survive in the profession. We also go further however to posit the need, in further conceptual work, to understand the interdependence between individual self-regulation and the social standard of regulation. In

other words, without a social standard of regulation that is also translated into individual self-regulation, journalists are at the mercy of the passions and emotions of sports fans that demand immediate fulfilment and that are highly likely to cause unwanted and unplanned pain. Indeed, the concerns raised by our interviewees about a curbing of professional style, or the avoidance of controversial topics, raise the vision of a less than free press.

It is also clear that the status of sports reporting is changing. Policymakers are growing increasingly aware of the social and political impacts of sport (Heerdt and Naess, 2021) and sports journalists conduct investigative stories that have wider social significance. Where, historically, international sport itself was conceptualised as war with other means (Liston and Maguire, 2022) based on the findings here, the same can be said, in that sports journalism is war with other means for those who routinely engage in mediated social relations expressed within the omnipresence and instantaneous/reactionary nature of digital cultures. Sports journalists are at the coalface of these emotional battles, and they are also relatively unprotected. Hence, the paper concludes by considering the implications that arise for the future of sports journalism and by proposing future lines of empirical and/or conceptual enquiry.

Implications and Future Lines of Enquiry

The concept of emotion work lends itself well to understanding the flow of emotions in and between journalists and their audiences, especially sports journalists' authentic emotional responses to online abuse. These emotions are less visible; they are often expressed in the (blurred) gaps between public and private spaces, and they play a central role in the quality of good sports journalism i.e., in crafting emotionally engaging narratives, writing evocative stories, generating emotive live coverage and captivating audiences. In this regard, further research is needed to understand more about how to deal with the various problems that demand high discipline among social media users and a uniform and moderate self-regulation. In this space, a certain degree of formal, legally enforced regulation and oversight is vital for the safe functioning of social media. But in sport, football included, the dominant pattern of self-regulation or habitus is focused yet on identification with national groups and, beneath these, regional or local tribes (often coalesced around sports clubs). It is critically important then to understand more about the identities of sports fans who engage in online abuse because, after all, sport acts as a key trigger for online abuse (Burch et al. 2023).

Practically speaking, there is a pressing need for some form of declaration or a code of practice around digital rights (see, for example, Mathiesen, 2014), as well as prescribed institutional procedures to better support sports journalists at the coalface of online abuse. Future research might also involve journalists from minoritised ethnic backgrounds who play an important role in the diverse social identities expressed in multicultural democratic societies (Obermaier, 2023). In our sample, one sports journalist, from a minoritised ethnic background, revealed that his knowledge and expertise was regularly questioned because he was considered an ‘outsider’. Such racialised, and even nationalistic, responses towards sports journalists’ outputs and identities represents an area worthy of future investigation. Other research might also explore similarities and differences between the responses of male and female sports journalists to abuse (see, Stahel and Schoen, 2019) and the ways in which visual images, GIFS, emojis and other visual codes are used to target individuals and communities online. For instance, our interviewees highlighted how sports clubs and organisations fuelled abuse directed at sports journalists, especially those who took critical stances. This was conducted through apparently offhand rhetoric and points toward the need for further analysis of online sports discussions as an incendiary context in which flippancy and ferocity often blur into one another. A quantitative and content analysis of social media datasets would also provide further insights into flashpoints for, and amplification of, abuse directed at sports journalists. More collaborative and strategic work between stakeholders, such as sports media and national governing bodies of sport, will also be required to move beyond the management of individual instances of abuse and to improve the efficacy of campaigns that seek to shift awareness of online abuse.

All of this begs an open question of sports journalism as a troubled profession given the self-censorship that was displayed here for professional survival. There are distinctive occupational demands made of sports journalists (see also Wahl-Jorgensen and Pantti, 2021) that impact their authentic selves. Further research should continue to investigate the impact of online abuse on sports writing and content, especially where this abuse has led to a change in career direction or even exits from the profession. Because women and minoritised ethnic journalists receive disproportionate amounts of online abuse, and this influences career decisions such as leaving the profession, there are serious implications for the diversification of sport media. Thus, further research into emotion work, and the mental health and wellbeing of journalists and sports journalists, is paramount.

Finally, the diffuse nature of online abuse means no one organisation wants to, or indeed can, own this problem. What is at work, ultimately, is how we live out our lives in interdependence with one another, and the role of digital technology in this. This process of technization is not confined to the most recent epoch – think about the invention of the motor car for instance (Elias, 1995) – and humankind is yet in the process of learning how to deal with the various problems that demand high discipline among digital, particularly social media, users. In this regard, a more uniform and moderate self-regulation, like that practiced today by all road users, is vital for the safe functioning of digital media. The application of this theoretical insight has the potential to take existing scholarship on online abuse in journalism, and on emotion work and the sports beat, in a new direction. None of this should detract from the development of a more coherent organisational approach to online abuse within sports journalism that places recipients and targets of abuse at the centre. In the longer-term, the priority must be on how to bring about coordinated social change, such that formal regulations, reporting protocols, and even punitive legal punishments become progressively unnecessary. In this, there is considerable value to be achieved from greater collaboration between academic researchers and sports journalists. The facilitation of knowledge exchange between them can bolster collective efforts to manage online abuse, protect and support sports journalists, and educate users about digital literacy and ‘netiquette’, and about the role of social media as a domain of individual and collective fantasising about ourselves and our futures.

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