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Online Abuse and the Challenges Faced by Sports Journalists in the UK and Ireland

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Online Abuse and the Challenges Faced by Sports Journalists in the UK and Ireland

By Jack Black and Gary Sinclair

Sports journalists in the UK and Ireland are encountering an alarming rise in [online abuse](#), which is profoundly affecting their work and well-being. Social media, while enabling direct interaction with audiences, has also exposed journalists to a constant threat of harassment, creating a new reality for the profession. The ubiquity of online abuse has significant implications, not only for journalists' mental health, but also for the quality and integrity of sports journalism itself. Online abuse frequently leads to self-censorship and emotional exhaustion, with formal institutional support and training for managing online abuse largely absent. While this leaves journalists with the task of navigating these difficulties on their own, it also highlights the need for further research on the nature of online abuse in sports, as well as stronger institutional measures to support journalists facing online harassment.

The Pervasiveness of Abuse and Emotional Toll

For many sports journalists, online abuse has become an almost inevitable part of their job, to the point that it is often 'habitually accepted'. Reporting on contentious topics—such as, player transfers, club ownership, or socio-political issues in sports—triggers intense backlash, with abuse coming from both individual fans and coordinated hate campaigns. This harassment can range from isolated attacks to organized 'pile-ons', including involvement from hate groups or even official sport club accounts, a reality that leaves journalists exposed to frequent waves of aggression.

The emotional toll of managing this abuse is profound. Journalists often engage in self-censorship, modifying or avoiding certain topics to prevent backlash. As one journalist, noted, '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'. Such restraint underscores the extent to which fear of abuse restricts journalists' freedom, encouraging a cautious approach that risks watering down critical or investigative reporting.

This constant need to regulate and suppress emotional responses represents a form of emotional labour that takes a significant toll on journalists' mental health. Anxiety, fear, and exhaustion are common responses, with journalists describing an enduring sense of vulnerability that seeps into their personal lives. As another journalist noted, 'Very few people brush off online abuse ... it is intrusive and it is personal'. The boundary between professional and personal life has become so blurred that harassment is now a persistent and intrusive presence, disrupting even journalists' private time.

Institutional Failures and Coping Alone

Despite the well-documented impact of online abuse on journalists, media organizations have been slow to provide adequate support to those facing these challenges. Most media institutions still do not offer substantial training or resources to help journalists handle abusive online interactions, even though research highlights a rise in harassment targeted at journalists. This gap in institutional support has led journalists to adapt their practices informally, with many resorting to self-censorship to avoid provoking abuse.

In sports journalism, where interactions with passionate and sometimes hostile audiences are frequent, the lack of formal support is particularly concerning. Emotion management is essential to the job, yet there is no standardized training for journalists on how to manage the emotional toll of online abuse. Moreover, freelance sports journalists face even greater vulnerability, as they lack the safety net and structural support that staff journalists may have access to within news organizations. This absence of institutional backing leaves journalists feeling exposed and unsupported, with one journalist noting, 'I don't think there's been any training ... about how to deal with it'.

While some organizations provide informal support, such as encouragement from colleagues, the majority of journalists are left to devise their own strategies for coping with abuse. These tactics often include muting, blocking, or ignoring abusive comments, yet such measures fall short of addressing the deeper psychological strain

associated with persistent harassment. This inadequate support leaves journalists isolated and at risk of significant mental health challenges, underscoring the urgent need for robust institutional measures to protect and assist journalists facing online abuse.

Implications for Press Freedom and Diversity

The rise of online abuse presents a significant threat to the freedom of the press within sports journalism, affecting both the quality of reporting and the breadth of voices represented. Many journalists report engaging in self-censorship to avoid backlash, ultimately limiting public discourse around critical issues in sports. Rather than freely exploring contentious or sensitive topics, journalists often second-guess their work, with some refraining from authentic reporting out of fear. Such a climate of intimidation undermines the depth and honesty of sports journalism, compromising its role in holding power to account and fostering informed public discussion.

Online abuse also poses a serious threat to diversity within the profession. Female and minority journalists are disproportionately targeted by hostile online behaviour, which can create an unwelcoming and sometimes intolerable work environment. Women, for example, frequently report facing sexist abuse and having their credentials questioned, particularly when covering men's sports. This discrimination not only detracts from their professional experience but also risks driving talented journalists out of the field entirely. The potential loss of these voices represents a setback for diversity and inclusivity, as their perspectives are essential to producing well-rounded and comprehensive sports coverage.

Addressing online abuse is essential to safeguarding diversity and freedom of the press in sports journalism. Active and robust measures—from institutional support to digital accountability—are needed to create a safer and more inclusive environment where all journalists can work without fear of harassment.

The Need for Urgent Action

Given the widespread impact of online abuse on sports journalists, media organizations, policymakers, and social media platforms must work collaboratively to tackle this issue. Establishing support systems within media organizations is a crucial first step, including formal training on managing online abuse and offering mental health resources for affected journalists. Media organizations also need to set clear policies for addressing harassment, engage with social media platforms to hold perpetrators accountable, and promote respectful online behaviour.

To protect the integrity of sports journalism, it is essential to invest in these reforms. Without them, the mental well-being and professional freedom of sports journalists will remain at risk, along with the quality and inclusiveness of sports journalism itself. By taking proactive steps, media organizations can create a safer environment for journalists, ensuring they can perform their essential work without the constant shadow of online abuse.

The rising prevalence of online abuse against sports journalists poses an urgent threat to journalistic integrity, mental health, and the diversity of voices within the field. Addressing this issue requires a concerted effort from media organizations, policymakers, and social media platforms, each with a role in fostering a safer and more supportive environment. Establishing formal support systems and clear policies will enable journalists to engage in their work without fear of harassment and will protect the depth and quality of sports coverage in the UK and Ireland.