

Sports journalists and corruption: between unintended and wilful blindness

Dino Numerato provides an account of the unintended and wilful ways in which journalists might contribute to the diffusion of corruption in contemporary sport

Journalists are significant interpreters of the world of sport. This means that they not only transmit the passion, spontaneity and pleasure of contemporary sports, but that they can also challenge the traditional principles of fair play by enhancing corruption. The recent increase of corruption in contemporary sports has been partially attributed to the symbiotic relationship between the realm of sport, the mass media, business and advertisement industry. Although the entire mass media and all journalists do not necessarily play the role of devils orchestrating corruption scandals, their involvement and possible contribution to corruption cannot be underestimated or sidelined. This short article will therefore focus on the role of journalists as actors who are potentially involved in the chain of corruption. For the sake of correctness, at the opposite pole, investigative journalism

sometimes contributes to the fight against corruption. However, this is not the focus of this article. The objective of this article is to present different forms of sports journalists' encroachment with corruption, with no ambition to quantify the occurrence of these types or to specify which of these types tend to

prevail. In general, this article will provide a brief account of two ways, in which journalists might contribute to the diffusion of corruption in contemporary sports.

First, they may unintentionally and indirectly contribute to corruption. In these cases they primarily focus on positive aspects of contemporary sports and have no interest to critically understand the processes that have detrimental effects for modern sports. In this vein, corruption is reproduced and made possible due to journalists' 'passivity' and their focus on neutral and non-conflictual issues of modern sports.

Second, sports journalists can intentionally contribute to corruption by being directly involved in the chain of corruption. In this vein, sports journalists, as bribed

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interpreters of sports events, facilitate the processes that keep corruption secret and that, in a sense, minimises the risks that match-fixing or bribes will be publicly

disclosed. Sports journalists can thereby act as direct participants of corruption scandals in a similar way as sport officials, managers, referees and athletes do.

It is worth noting that sports corruption is not linked only to sports performance of athletes or referees, but also to sports politics. In



other words, sports corruption may be related to the decisions that are made in the corridors of sport governing bodies in relation to mega sports-events bids, acquisition of broadcasting rights and decisions about contracts with sponsors.

Sports journalists' unintended blindness to corruption

Corruption may be facilitated thanks to a simple and unintended blindness of sports journalists who can be naively enchanted by the beauty of sports performance, immersed into the daily journalism routine or kept innocent thanks to symbolic and material gifts invented by public relation magicians. In these conditions, sports journalism consists primarily of efforts to get exclusive information and to provide technically perfect reproduction of the spectacle of contemporary sports.

This standpoint can be reinforced by means of sports journalists' education which may prioritise other objectives than cultivating healthy suspicion to sports encroachments with politics and business. The professional culture of sports journalism whereby the primary concern is to entertain media audiences rather than to critically inform, investigate or to disclose a violation of rules, may similarly nourish the unintended blindness to corruption. Last but not the least, on top of common public relations strategies, sports journalists are also often exposed to sophisticated public relations practices that tend to discursively hide corruption by a strategic use of vocabulary which is contradictory to any effort to violate fair-play rules, such as transparency or accountability (Jennings, 2011).

Based on an analysis of 80 newspapers across 22 countries, the International Sports Press Survey (ISPS) (2011) demonstrated that the informative function of the mass media prevailed and that nearly four articles out of five provided results, match reports, competition previews, with a focus on sport aspects. Only a very limited proportion of newspaper articles portrayed sport in the context of other topics potentially connected with corruption such as politics or sports financing (Horky and Nieland, 2011).

It is not the intention to draw here a picture of naïve journalists who are enchanted by the world of celebrities or trapped into public relations games. Each new public disclosure of corruption is also connected with a duty to bring corruption cases to legal authorities and accompany complaints with clear proofs: many journalists hesitate before publicly disclosing their suspicions as they are not absolutely convinced about their hypotheses or as they are aware that their claims and often indirect symptoms of bribing can be easily disputed. Sports journalists' uncritical approach can also be linked to their simple and vital dependency on their sources. From this perspective, any criticism of sports clubs and disclosure of corruption can be followed by access restrictions to a single journalist or to a media organisation: an access that is fundamental for sports journalists to carry out their professional tasks (Hill, 2008; Rowe, 2007; Smith, 1976).

Sports journalists' wilful blindness to corruption

Sports journalists can be conscious participants in the chain of corruption, by being part of clientelistic allegiances among sports officials, athletes, referees and sports business representatives. In this manner sports journalists either deliberately hide corruption from the public attention, or they contribute to a biased portrayal of corrupted sports performances, deliberate mistakes of referees, or decisions of bribed sports officials. The wilful participation in corruption can be directly connected to journalists'

work and therefore contribute to a biased content of media messages such as newspaper articles and TV match reports.

Moreover, journalists' active engagement in corruption can also be related to the gate-keeping processes and editorial decisions made within media organisations. This indirect method can lead to a delegation of 'reliable' journalists for particular events, in other words to the delegation of journalists who are likely to portray and interpret a sports related event in a non-suspicious manner. This method can, furthermore, guarantee an increased media coverage of events or advertisement banners that would otherwise receive little mass media attention.

The biased interpretation of sports events and sports performance can be linked to post-match TV shows that offer space for a more in-depth analysis of potentially suspicious moments. Published phone interceptions from the Italian football 'Calciopoli' corruption affair provided evidence about situations in which sports managers influenced the selection of guests invited to television programmes, the selection of problematic situations to be analysed or the results of viewers polls. Similar events in Czech football provide evidence about the influence of sports managers on the selection of journalists for match reports and about their efforts to bias mass media evaluations of the performance of corrupted and deliberately erroneous referees (Numerato, 2009).

Corrupting interpreters

To sum up, 'to bribe' in contemporary sports does not only mean to directly impact upon on sports governance decisions and on sports performance. Within the context of the corruption complex, the capacity to bribe is often merged

with a capacity to influence the ways in which a corrupted event is portrayed by the mass media. In other words, to bribe does not mean to gain control only over an act of corruption, but also over the

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interpretation of the same act. Allegiances between sports journalists and editors and sports officials, managers, referees and athletes are therefore crucial to guarantee control over a mass media

interpretation. However, the strategy to take control over interpretation does not only increase the likelihood that an act of corruption remains symbolically kept in secrecy. The likelihood that a case of corruption is disclosed increases as the number of potentially vulnerable elements of the corruption chain increases. Hence, to bribe a media interpretation is not a guarantee for keeping corruption in secrecy. ■

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