



Media's role in (un)covering organised match-fixing in Brazil

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Abstract

In this article, we address the subject of the recent appearance and exponential and uncontrollable growth that betting had in the Brazilian sports context, alongside numerous changes in the country's legislation system. Against the backdrop of this growth, we explore the Operation Penalty Kick organised match-fixing scandal, which unravelled in the country, as the media detailed it. Using media sources and field notes from two actors immersed in the field, we analyse the key actors and the processes of the criminal activity while exploring the ways in which it was organised, drawing parallels with trade-type network structures. Through the analysis, we argue that media are to be questioned on their role in (un)covering details of the criminal activity and key actors, once focusing the narrative away from organised crime and its financing they assist in perpetuating the culture of unpunished corruption in the country.

Keywords Betting · Betting-related fixing · Sport corruption · Sport integrity

Introduction

Gambling was a fairly popular pastime in Brazil until it was outlawed in 1946 when only the national lottery was permitted. The ban was very successful, and even if some casinos and other illegal forms of gambling remained (and discussed due to occasional scandals), gambling was largely absent from the public life and culture of Brazilians. The emergence and popularity of the internet made it harder to keep the activity banned due to the possibility of betting on international websites using a credit card making betting easily accessible to all. Sports betting was partially legalized in the country only in 2018. The Decree Law 13,756, which decriminalized sports betting has only been recently regulated by a presidential provisional mea-

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sure in 2023, though without establishing regulatory policies to prevent match-fixing activities. Consequently, while sports betting grew exponentially, capturing prime positions in sports sponsorship and advertising, match-fixing emerged (once again) in Brazil as the opportunities for betting increased.

Currently, Brazil is the third largest sports betting market, only behind the United States and England (Souza 2024). The presence of imagery linked to ‘betting websites’ has become ubiquitous, with betting advertising becoming the norm (Lopez-Gonzalez, Guerrero-Solé & Griffiths, 2017). Similarly to other leagues across the world, betting sponsorship in Brazil can also now be seen through players, managers, journalists, and teams, and even through competitions’ naming rights (Crompton 2014). The penetration of sports betting companies in Brazilian football has become particularly evident in its two larger national competitions. Currently, except for Cuiaba Esporte Clube, the other 19 football clubs of the Brazilian Serie A (First Division) 2023/2024 season are sponsored by betting companies (Souza 2024). In 2023, the CBF negotiated the naming rights of Brazil’s second division to the Greece-based betting company Betano, renaming the national competition as the “Série Betano 2023” (Capelo 2023a). In parallel, several famous former football players are spokespeople for betting companies alongside renowned television and print media journalists (Junior 2023).

Against this backdrop, the country has been observing an increasing number of suspicious matches, with questions involving its final results and other instances of the game, such as manipulation of the number of corner kicks, fouls committed, and red and yellow cards received (Marchetti et al. 2021). For instance, SportsRadar detected 152 football matches in the country as suspicious in 2022 alone, with half of these matches being played in the lower divisions of the sport (Globo.com 2023a). Public suspicions have been widely accentuated by both sports and non-sports media news outlets reporting the potential of game manipulation by scrutinising suspicious players’ behaviour during matches in all four divisions of Brazilian football and state championships while suggesting that match fixing had been allegedly organised in conjunction with organized crime groups (Parrini 2023; Petrucci 2023).

The year 2022 marks the beginning of the first betting-related scandal since the legalisation of the activity and the first time the negative effects of gambling, such as match-fixing, were broadly discussed, exposing the unchecked growth of the sports betting industry and urging further regulation. In this exploratory study, we focus on the Operational Penalty Kick, a betting-related fixing scandal on a national scale, revealed to the press by the Special Action Group to Combat Organized Crime (GAECO) of the Public Office of the State of Goiás in February 2023. More specifically, in this paper we are guided by the following research question: *How was the Operation Penalty Kick organised, as it was reported by the media?* Through this, in our study we delve into the organisation of Operation Penalty Kick, how Brazilian media portrayed the organisation of this operation, and the key role they held in (un) covering the scandal and (intentionally or not) urging for regulatory changes to be achieved.

By drawing parallels between trade-type network structures as they are explored by Breuer and Varese (2023) and the organisation behind the Operation Penalty Kick in Brazil, this study highlights the key actors and the roles they held within the

criminal organisation, as well as the highly influential role of the media in reporting the scandal and making it what Reiner (2007) calls a ‘mental chewing gum’ for their mass audiences. We will begin our analysis by detailing the development of the sports betting legislation in Brazil and how perceptions changed alongside the media’s reporting of betting.

Sport betting legislation in Brazil

Often influenced by political, social, economic, and religious pressures, politicians are faced with challenges related to sports betting, moments which might result either in the activity’s criminalisation or in the adoption of a regulatory framework to promote revenue generation and explore its economic impacts (Phalpher and Targino de Araujo, 2021). For Forrest (2018), these two opposite scenarios constitute an important sports ambiguity worthy of exploration since, simultaneously, sports betting can represent a legitimate and welcomed source of income from a business perspective and a threat to the very nature of the sport by allowing the potential emergence of match-fixing. Since the 1940s, Brazilian legislation has largely forbidden online and offline sports betting due to parallel illicit activities such as money laundering and organized crime, which have been considered an indispensable yet feared part of the sport in the country (Borges 2012). As such, betting was viewed in Brazilian law like gambling linked to lottery games, and as a result was met with indirect legislative prohibitions (Borges 2012).

According to Phalpher and Targino de Araujo (2021), the first sports-related betting regulation within the Brazilian law system was linked to horse racing, in which the former president Getúlio Vargas, through the Presidential Decree No. 24.646/1934, allowed spectators to bet exclusively inside horse racing tracks with the ultimate goal of ensuring horse-breeding across the country. In the next decade, under the “Brazilian Criminal Contraventions Law” (Decree-Law No. 3.688/1941), betting activities on horse racing events organised outside of racecourses and involving any other sports competitions were criminalised. Five years later, Presidential Decree No 9.215/1946, signed by Eurico Dutra, reinforced these prohibitions on the basis that this repression was imperative for the universal conscience, in alignment with the criminal legislation of “morally advanced” nations, and with the legal and religious tradition of Brazilian people (Borges 2012).

In 1961, Presidential Decree No 50.578/1961, beyond updating the regulations focusing on horse-breeding in Brazil by increasing the betting profit shares to the breeders of winning horses from 3 to 8%, once again expressly underlined the prohibition of gambling and betting involving every other sports competition. At the end of the decade, when Brazil was under a military dictatorship, the “Sports Lottery” was created by Presidential Decree 594/1969 to be exclusively linked (and exploited) by the Brazilian Federal Government Bank. Remarkably, while sport betting was not allowed through the lottery, with the process focusing on individuals picking random numbers in the hopes that they are picked in the draw, proceeds from the lottery helped fund the Brazilian Football Championship organised by the former Brazilian Confederation of Sports (CBD) for several years (Phalpher and Targino de Araujo,

2021). The last sport-based betting legislation of the 20th century, introduced in 1984, established the creation of betting stations within and outside the racecourses, including the possibility of receiving bets by telephone (Borges 2012).

In 2006, four years after the end of the national sports lottery, the Brazilian government created a new sporting lottery named “Timemania” with the promulgation of Law No 11.345/2006. In this lottery, once again, no sports betting was allowed, with the lottery involving the selection of random numbers and people’s “favourite club” instead (Silva et al. 2020). Through Timemania, football clubs began to receive 22% of the earnings of every lottery draw, which was automatically allocated to federal tax payments to cover some of the significant debt the clubs had accumulated (Borges 2012). In 2010, with the amendment of the Fans’ Bill of Rights Act (Law No. 12,299/2010), greatly motivated by the “Whistle Mafia” case (a match-fixing scandal involving the results of eleven official matches in the 2005 Brazilian First Division Championship, in which former FIFA referee Edilson Pereira de Carvalho and his assistant referee Paulo José Danelon accepted bribes from the gambler Nagib Fayad (Bertazzo Tobar and Ramshaw 2022), the Brazilian law system for the first time in its history typified the manipulation of sport outcomes as a criminal conduct.

The so-called “New Fans’ Bill of Rights” imposed fines and prison terms of 2–6 years for anyone who sought or accepted an advantage, whether financial or otherwise, or a promise of an advantage for themselves or a third party, regarding any act or omission that compromised the outcome of a sporting event (Borges 2012). Targino de Araujo (2020) pointed out that disciplinary norms from sport administration entities such as FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) and the CBF (Brazilian Football Confederation) could have been previously enforced by the Brazilian Judiciary System using the “referral procedure mechanism” (Nicolau 2018) instituted in Law 9.615/1998, popularly known as the Pelé Law, which grants the status of ordinary Law to rules and regulations edited by national and international sport administration entities. In this context, both FIFA and CBF’s Ethical Codes expressly forbid individuals from the football milieu (athletes, coaches, members of the technical commission, directors, and members of the refereeing team, and all those who directly or indirectly may influence the outcome of matches) to take part in betting activities. Nevertheless, such an adoption of the rules was not implemented until the “New Fans’ Bill of Rights” was introduced.

Due to the fast and impressive growth of the sports betting global industry, exemplified in Brazil by roughly 500 active betting companies operating through offshore platforms, and estimations showing the market potential to generate up to 10 billion dollars annually, the Brazilian National Congress passed the Law 13.756/2018 legalising sports betting and gambling (Lopez-Gonzalez and Griffiths, 2018; Targino 2020). The law innovated by allowing the exploitation of fixed-odds sports betting, including online, conditioned to a regulatory decree to be presented by the government until the end of 2022 (Phalpher and Targino de Araujo, 2021). Following the historical pattern of treating betting and gambling as synonymous in Brazilian law, fixed-odds sports betting of real events (including e-sports contests) was, at this point, considered equal to lotteries. For Targino de Araujo (2020), this interpretation represented a strategy to reduce potential resistance from religious-based political parties averse to legalizing gambling in the country. In addition to this, Phalpher

and Targino de Araujo (2021) underlined that under the new law - highly affected by neo-liberalism principles - the activity was rendered the status of public service and delegated to private operators.

Furthermore, following the above-mentioned practice of lotteries financing football clubs, sports betting companies were made to compensate for exploring clubs' images and emblems in their business platforms. Importantly, football clubs were not legally forced to share this revenue with their players or coaches. Moreover, sports betting companies were subjected to paying progressive taxes over their business turnovers to the Federal Government, which, in turn, had to be reinvested in public education and security projects (Phalpher and Targino de Araujo, 2021). Despite this noteworthy advancement of the Brazilian Law system un-prohibiting both betting and gambling, two arguably popular cultural activities, the concerns over their links with activities such as money laundering remained, with the law indicating that sports betting operators had to share information with the Council of Control of Financial Activities (COAF) linked to the Central Bank of Brazil. At the same time, nonetheless, the law did not introduce any advertising regulations and strategies to promote responsible gambling or offer dispositions to prevent gambling addiction and the participation of minors, while there has been a lack of sanctions for operators in case of misconduct, tax fraud, or other abuses and illegal activities (Phalpher and Targino de Araujo, 2021).

Concerns towards implementing positive social outcomes at the policy level have been addressed by the recent changes in Law 13.756/2018, promoted by the new government through the Provisional Measure n. 1.182/2023. The publication of this provisional measure was a direct consequence of Operation Penalty Kick and the media's influential role in demanding the regulation of the sports betting market (Rizek et al. 2023). More importantly, the new legislative measure regulated sports betting activities and the accreditation of betting companies operating within the nation. Stricter guidelines were introduced, stipulating that only officially registered enterprises could facilitate bets on official sporting events sanctioned by recognized federations, leagues, and confederations and engage in sponsorship practices. An important point was the introduction of an 18% tax on companies' Gross Gaming Revenue (GGR) to be distributed in public safety (including to prevent and combat match-fixing and money laundering), basic education on responsible gambling, sports clubs, and social welfare initiatives. Despite these advancements, the provisional measure did not create policies to mitigate match-fixing and corruption in sports events in Brazil.

Methodology

In this exploratory qualitative content analysis study (Villeneuve, Aquilina, 2016; Neuendorf 2002), we aim to analyse the media coverage of the two phases of the Operation Penalty Kick, focusing on three aspects: the key actors, the processes and the (un)reporting from the media. Two main sources of data were used for this study. The primary source of data consists of articles retrieved from the Globo.com website. The Grupo Globo is the largest media conglomerate in Brazil, owning the most-watched TV channel of the same name and the Rio de Janeiro printed newspaper O

Globo (<https://oglobo.globo.com/>), plus several regional news outlets. The website Globo.com is, in fact, one of the most visited in the world, attracting more visitors daily than BBC, CNN and the New York Times, encompassing all content produced by the group, including the G1 news website (<https://g1.globo.com/>) and Globoesporte.com, which focuses on sports news. The Globo.com website is not aligned with any particular political party in the country, either directly or indirectly. Given its large amount of content produced and the wide reach and popularity it has within the country, resulting in its ability to ‘set the tone’ (Oh et al. 2020), we purposely did not explore other media outlets. Data collection encompassed the period between February 14, 2023 - the date of the announcement of the first phase of the operation - and August 18, 2023, which marked four months after the announcement of the second phase of the operation, where the stories communicated through the media had reached a point of information saturation related to the operation. Within this period, 694 articles were identified as related to the scandal, with 59 related to the first phase of the operation and 635 related to the second one. All articles collected were analysed with the purpose of revealing the details behind the organisation of the betting-related scandal and how the media communicated it.

As for the role that media played in uncovering the scandal, notably to better understand the context and details from media texts, field research was utilised for the study. While being employed on a full-time basis, two of the authors of this article, one as a reporter in a prominent media outlet in Brazil and the other as a sports lawyer have kept diaries and notes, which were used to create, and complement or offer evidence in text passages. Fieldwork allowed these two researchers to examine difficult-to-reach individuals and processes first-hand while better comprehending the media’s role within it, even when not directly related to Operation Penalty Kick. The two researchers have been immersed in the field for more than a decade and, as such, participated in activities not necessarily related to data collection per se (Hobbs and Antonopoulos 2014).

Importantly, this study has not been free of limitations. First, in terms of published media sources, we acknowledge that how reporting occurs can affect what and how it is reported, at times potentially focusing more on sensationalisation rather than objective reporting of the news. Nonetheless, we consider that through the detailed accounts offered in the articles examined and the methodological triangulation through the use of content and narrative document analysis (Smith 2000) as well as fieldnotes and diary (Patton 2002), the most important features of the issue under study were identified, offering an additional layer of validity to our findings. Second, in terms of the ethnographic data, while no claims of neutral representation of what occurred can be made in any ethnographic study since the researchers themselves are the data collection and analysis “instruments” (White et al. 2009), researchers made an effort to produce accounts that are representative of the issue as they experienced it through their engagement in Brazilian media. While the validity of the accounts is increased by the inclusion of data from two ethnographic researchers, we also recognise the limitation arising from them and, as such, make no claims of wider generalisation of the findings.

Operation penalty kick

Our data analysis allowed the identification of two types of actors involved in the Operation Penalty Kick scandal, which we will call the *organisers* and the *players*. The organisers include the individuals involved in funding and organising the particular instances that were supposed to occur (e.g. goals, penalty kicks, corner-kicks, fouls, and red and yellow cards in particular moments of a match) and the recruiters of athletes. Some reports seek to divide the accused into different nuclei, such as bettors, investors, administrative, and recruiters (Macêdo 2023). However, in most of them, the organisation is treated as functioning in a very diffuse way, with each participant also acting as a recruiter and bettor, and with no clear information on how the initial contribution of money was made (Globo.com 2023a). The eleven organisers of the scheme include owners of sports marketing agencies operating in Brazil, their family members and associates, and former football players. The players, the second key actor category, included current players who only agreed to perform prearranged actions (e.g., provoke yellow or red cards, penalties, etc.) in specific matches and those who, on top of doing so, also agreed to act as players-recruiters. Most of these players were employed in smaller teams, participating in lower divisions of the sport in Brazil. The attention these two groups of individuals received, however, was disproportional to their involvement in the operation, with the media shifting the focus not only on some individuals but also away from others (Globo.com 2023c).

The Operation Penalty Kick took place in two separate phases. The ‘Operation Penalty Kick I’ was the beginning of the scandal, which was revealed to the Press by the Special Action Group to Combat Organized Crime (GAECO) of the Public Office of the State of Goiás in February 2023. This phase of the operation suggests a certain level of amateurism, which facilitated the investigations. According to the media reports, the most straightforward scheme would be reduced to the approach of an organiser to a player, with the offer that ranged between R\$50.000 (fifty thousand Brazilian Reais) to R\$ 100.000 (one-hundred Brazilian Reais) (often greater than the monthly salary of said player) to perform a specific action during the match, which could potentially lead to perform similar or different daring actions in future games (Macêdo 2023). On certain occasions, players were threatened by organisers to continue cooperating to avoid their names being “leaked” to the media alongside evidence of their previous participation in the scheme. In other cases, the players found themselves indebted to the organisers for not having played in a certain game or for not carrying out the prearranged action, with the organisers demanding more extreme actions and/or enticing more players (Guimarães and Vasconcelos, 2023).

The trigger to the beginning of the operation involved the attempt to manipulate the results of three matches of the final round of the second division of the Brazilian national championship that occurred on November 6th 2022. According to reports, players in three different teams agreed to deliberate cause penalty kicks in the first half of three matches (Santana 2023). The scheme to manipulate these three matches was uncovered because one implicated player did not play in the match he had agreed to make a penalty despite receiving the first part of the bribery payment before the match. Reports from the media indicated that the criminal organization began to harass the player for his failure to deliver the desired outcome due to their financial

losses estimated at around R\$ 500.000 to R\$ 2.000.000,00 and contacted the players' club president (Gomes and Macêdo 2023; Oliveira 2023). It was precisely this harassment that made the club president, who is a police officer, report the incident to authorities and begin to unravel the scandal (Guimarães and Vasconcelos, 2023). Further investigations revealed the involvement of 14 individuals, encompassing 8 players and 6 organisers (Oliveira 2023; Gomes 2023). However, only one player initially received a football ban for life from the CBF's Superior Sports Justice Court as the court deemed him as an active intermediary for the criminal organization by recruiting or attempting to recruit players to the scheme (Zarko 2023).

The first phase of the operation attracted little attention from the press. Across all our data, less than ten per cent of all articles discussed the first phase, with the vast majority merely describing the events as the Public Office of the State of Goiás published them. It is worth noting that a mere month after the public announcement from the Public Office of the State of Goiás occurred (February 14th), the issue had almost vanished from the media, with nothing reported until the announcement of the second phase of the operation (April 18th). The coverage of the operation's first phase focused almost entirely on the three games and the players involved, with little being discussed about the *modus operandi* and the structure of the "gang" (Gomes 2023; Moura 2023). Rather than focusing on the structure and *modus operandi* of this originally labelled criminal organisation, however, the media focused almost exclusively on two of its participants: the owner of an intermediary agency who was presented as the main leader of the scandal and his wife, with reporting on both being somewhat sensationalized due to their luxurious lifestyles that included international trips (Globo.com 2023a). At the same time, very little attention (only 3 articles identified) was paid to discussing the broader issue of betting in Brazil and the need for industry regulation.

The press dedicated far greater attention to the second phase of the operation by providing extensive information on the criminal organisation's operations, including screenshots of the communication between the organisers and the players (Barros and Zarko 2023). WhatsApp and Instagram, two instant messaging apps owned by Meta, which are available to Android and iPhone, were used by organisers and players to arrange match-fixing. In particular, WhatsApp, which has Brazil as its second global market, with 147 million users (Bianchi 2024), was the primary vehicle used by organizers as it enabled quick communication with players even minutes before matches (Gomes and Macêdo 2023; Peruzzo 2023). Moreover, the method of payment (in instalments before and after the match-fixing through the use of fake accounts or those belonging to third parties) was now reported, as well as the regular use of players as intermediaries for player recruitment (Globo.com 2023e; Peruzzo 2023).

The success of the criminal scheme has been attributed largely to the organic recruitment of players by other players from the same clubs. The media pointed out how players acting as recruiters/intermediaries were promised higher return fees when the betting was successful (Peruzzo 2023; Globo.com 2023e). Due to the access of WhatsApp screenshots, the media also exposed life threats from organisers to players who could not fulfil their promises. The losses were considered a failed financial investment, which should be paid back by the involved players no matter the consequences to be reinvested with other players (Zarko 2023). The media also

highlighted the profits obtained by the criminal organization during specific features of the Brazilian Championship (Globo.com 2023d). Of important note, the press often reinforced that referees, coaches, and managers were not involved nor that final match results had been fixed to cause a change or pause in the championship (Globo.com 2023d; Barros and Zarko 2023). On this point, the media did not consider the scandal as a threat to the legitimacy of the competition and instead approached it as an isolated case only involving a few players and the organizers.

Interestingly enough, the term “match-fixing” was not used in the media’s reporting to refer to the manipulation of final scores, which would put into jeopardy the image of the competition, but to other facets of the game deemed as less inoffensive (Gomes 2023). Nonetheless, the media several times echoed the claims of a series of betting companies – considered victims of the scheme - for legislation changes to regulate the betting industry and ensure the integrity and credibility of Brazilian football. The media reports also reinforced the entertainment nature of betting activities instead of pushing for prohibitions such as sponsorships involving betting companies and football clubs (Capelo 2023b).

Despite the ever-increasing prominence given to the scandal in its second phase, the press showed little interest in the organisers, except for the supposed operation leader and his wife. On this point, their personal lives continued to be scrutinised by the media, which labelled the criminal scheme as a “family business” (Soares and Malek 2023) while ignoring loose ends in such an explanatory structure. For instance, questions regarding the structure of the organisation of the scheme - the means to finance the operation, cover losses, or recruitment of non-family members - were not put into debate by the media in their reporting of the operation. Additionally, the press overlooked other organisers, often called “businessmen” (Mauad 2023). Sporadically, due to their names appearing on WhatsApp conversations, the press mentioned other intermediaries like former players as well as investors, but without engaging in an in-depth discussion of their personal and professional lives as was done so for the so-called main leader of the scheme and his wife (Ribas et al. 2023). In summary, the press showed an overall lack of interest in discussing the connections between the several individuals indicted, with a clear emphasis placed on only two people.

The immersion and field notes kept by two of the members of the research team allowed for the data collected through media sources to pass through the sieve of a ‘reality check’ only possible with the ‘insiders’ knowledge. It was through this check that the emphasis placed almost exclusively on only two individuals and their sensationalised lives was questioned for its accurate depiction of how the operation was organized. The lack of discussion by the press on how the operation was run, how it was financed, how members were recruited and how middle men operated, despite findings made public that could trigger such an interest and potential analysis (e.g. whatsapp messages revealing particular intermediaries), was highlighted when it was juxtapositioned with the field notes. It was through this comparison between what happened as per the field notes and what was reported as the main headlines of the operation, with key information being passed on as minor and indifferent details in articles, that we were able to identify that the media were arbitrarily choosing what and how to communicate about the investigation and the scandal. Such a compari-

son or a ‘reality check’, which would not have been possible without the ‘insiders’ knowledge, helped us gain a deeper understanding of how the operation was covered by the media and was thus communicated to the public.

Social structure and media’s (mis)coverage

Taking the above analysis into consideration, we are presented with a similar image as seen in other match-fixing scandals, such as in Greece (Manoli and Antonopoulos 2015), and Turkey (Yilmaz et al. 2019), in which the individuals reported to be involved in the organizations were native individuals already embedded in the respective local football industries. As such, and to the extent of the published information available, the key actors cannot be considered exogenous to the industry, trying to infiltrate it for the generation of profit. Instead, they appear to be endogenous actors involved through different capacities in the industry, having already built relationships with other endogenous individuals through their legitimate football-related companies, something that contradicts previous research on match-fixing in the country (Marchetti et al. 2021, 2022). The actors of the organisation behind Operation Penalty Kick demonstrated such an ability to accumulate and utilise social capital and personal connections developed through their embeddedness in order to organise the match-fixing / betting scandal by convincing (and harassing/threatening) footballers to act according to their plans. Through the lens of a social network analysis, we can also see how the organisation behind the Operation Penalty Kick operated like a trade-type organized crime network, based on a rather centralized and dense network, in order to assist in short-term coordination of activities (Breuer and Varese 2023), centred round a few key people (Varese 2006). An example of this can be seen in the fact that the fixing was centred around short-term decisions (e.g. number of penalties in the next match), and not on long-term outcomes (e.g. winning the championship). This was further assisted by the short paths identified between nodes or members of the organization, to increase the ease of information transmission (as suggested by Breuer and Varese 2023 and Varese 2006), with each fixing organised with the involvement of very few people, and communication based often on direct messages in the case of Operation Penalty Kick.

At the same time, while the practices adopted involved both threats or intimidation and the promise of reward, their structure, as it was detailed by the media, appeared to be rather flat or horizontal (lacking rigid hierarchical norms), and consisting of multiple relationships built around each potential fix. A similar comparison can be made with the ‘scale-free’ structure Varese (2006) suggests that social networks of organized crime can adopt, while at the same time maintaining the centering round a few key individuals. Interestingly, and potentially due to its horizontal structure, the organisation behind the Operation Penalty Kick was also underestimated, with the reporting of the media assisting in downplaying the scandal and promoting new meanings to the term ‘match-fixing’.

As previous research in match-fixing scandals in Brazil has argued (Marchetti et al. 2021, 2022), the existence of the manipulation is predominantly due to the lack of regulations in regards to betting, with the complex and at times rather poor gov-

ernance of the sport and its regulations being paired with a culture of unpunished corruption within the country, and, we add, with the media holding an important yet unappreciated role in this matrix, potentially assisting in such phenomena to be perpetuated. Through the above analysis of the media sources and what was extensively, at times, reported on the scandal, we are presented with a detailed depiction of the match-fixing scandal and how this well-organized criminal activity was carried out. We are also presented with evidence proving that media are also rightfully so credited with acting as a pressure level for change in the legislation and regulation of betting. Nonetheless, through this examination we are simultaneously presented with a number of questions on areas that have not received enough or even any attention by the press. For instance, the financing of the whole operation remains to this day a mystery, with equally not enough questions asked about it on the media. Despite original mentions of this so called ‘criminal organisation’, we are told close to nothing about the majority of its members that found themselves facing legal consequences, with the lion’s share of the media’s attention turned on two or three individuals whose lifestyle was instead discussed extensively, even when unrelated to the match-fixing in question. This in turn allows us to argue that media’s role in communicating match-fixing in Brazil deviated from what has been previously argued, with questions of accountability being once again disregarded by the media (as previous research on media’s role in communicating corruption in the country has argued - Damgaard 2018). Instead, the effort to divert attention away from difficult questions (that the public was nevertheless asking – such as the financing of the organisation and any additional actors within it), points towards a wider attempt to restrict the terms of the discussion around Operation Penalty Kick, and thus facilitate the marginalisation of any potential competing views and additional queries regarding the organised crime organisation behind it and how it should be investigated (Sacco 1995).

The role of media in communicating corruption within the realm of sports is a subject of particular significance within academic literature (Akani 2017; Manoli and Bandura 2021). Corruption, whether in the form of match-fixing, doping scandals, or financial mismanagement, has the potential to erode the very essence of fair play and integrity in sports. As such, the academic discourse highlights that media, both traditional and digital, can act as a vital watchdog, shedding light on corrupt and criminal activities and promoting accountability within the sports industry (Coronel 2010; Manoli & Janecic, 2021). It is thus emphasised that media can play a crucial triple role in uncovering these corrupt practices and exposing them to the public eye (Masters and Graycar 2015; Stapenhurst 2000). As a result, media coverage serves not only as a means of raising awareness but also as a platform for initiating conversations about integrity and fair play in sports, while importantly adding pressure on the individuals involved and the authorities and governing bodies for transparency and accountability. As it has in other domains, media in the sports context utilizes its power to name and shame individuals and organizations involved in corrupt and criminal activities, effectively influencing the reputation of those implicated and thus acting as a potential control level against corruption. As Stapenhurst (2000) put it, media can therefore have an informative, investigatory and corrective role in regard to corruption in sport and beyond. It is therefore argued that accurate and rigorous reporting by the media can contribute to a climate of transparency within the sports

industry. Nevertheless, recent studies also acknowledge the challenges faced by media outlets, including issues of bias and credibility, as well as the complex power relations that exist between different media outlets and key actors in the sport industry (Manoli & Janecic, 2021). It is these challenges, research argues, that obstruct the media from carrying out their ‘duty’ in reporting corruption in sport, something that one could argue is the case in the Brazilian match-fixing scandal examined.

As we saw in our analysis, media appeared to be ‘cherry-picking’ the actors to focus upon and the way in which they were presented, with emphasis often placed on aspects less relevant to the case in hand, potentially distracting from more difficult to answer questions, such as the full scale of the ‘criminal organisation’ and its financial backing. The way in which media communicated the match-fixing / betting scandal allowed for certain important aspects of the criminal activity to be maybe intentionally omitted, with the emphasis of the reporting and thus the overall media narrative being instead placed on rather sensationalised lifestyle elements of only two of the key actors. Even the wording used in the reporting mirrored this practice, with early mentions of ‘criminal organisation’ and ‘organised crime’ being soon replaced with lifestyle details on the lives of two of the main actors. When taking into consideration the embeddedness of the criminal organisation behind Operation Penalty Kick and the wider culture of unpunished corruption within the country (Marchetti et al. 2021, 2022), both paired with the media’s choice to restrict and deviate the discussion (Sacco 1995), we can argue that the media further facilitated the existing status quo. While the media themselves are not expected to conduct criminal investigations (despite their praised ability to indeed play an investigatory role - Stapenhurst 2000), they are expected to use their power to inform and influence the public about crime while acting as a lever for change, justice, transparency and accountability (Reiner 2007; Sacco 1995; Stapenhurst 2000). As such, and while the media’s informative role in this scandal is to be recognised, alongside their contribution in urging for legislative change, their inability to ask difficult questions, investigate and inform the public about the organisation of this criminal activity, and put pressure on the authorities for transparency, leads us to argue that their role was to (mis)communicate organised match-fixing in Brazil.

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Declarations

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