

# Challenges to the role of media in reporting sport corruption: Insights from reporters in Balkan countries

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## Abstract

Despite the influence and power that the media hold and the importance placed on the role that they can assume regarding corruption, little is known about the part the media can play in corruption in sport and any challenges they might face in reporting on it. This study aims to shed light on this unexplored area, by using insights from members of the media based in three Balkan countries, to help uncover the challenges and obstacles faced by sport media. The findings of this study allow for the multifold role of the media in sport corruption to be examined, while uncovering the internally and externally driven obstacles they face, ranging from personal greed to market-based pressures and media's ostracism by the wider anti-corruption system.

## Keywords

Balkans, interviews, journalism, sport corruption, sport media, sport integrity

## Introduction

It is often argued that it is the duty of the media to report corruption, as they have the power not only to report and uncover events, but also to shape public opinions, affect the social climate and highlight accountability (Akani, 2017). Staphenurst (2000) and Coronel (2010) claim that the media have a critical triple role in issues of corruption, and as such they must promote good governance and raise public awareness, investigate independently and report instances of corruption when they arise, and even act as a corrective 'watchdog' to discourage individuals from being involved in corruption. This,

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however, might prove difficult for the media in certain areas and countries, especially those struggling with resources, such as time and money, which might force the media to rely heavily on advertisers and subsequently report favourably on the issues close to their funding providers (Beattie et al., 2017). Indeed, while independent reporting is believed to be a fundamental value of democratic countries, different levels of scrutiny exist in countries and sectors with different levels of development, with less-developed countries and less-developed industries often identifying problematic issues in the way in which their media report corruption (Camaj, 2012; Dutta and Roy, 2016).

For example, in the geographical area of the Balkans, in the south-eastern part of Europe which is the context of this study, media freedom has often attracted substantial criticism, with reports suggesting that political, economic and social pressures are putting the media's freedom under regular 'attacks' (Bieber and Kmezcic, 2015). A key underlying factor of these attacks lies in the commercial pressures that media outlets are facing in the Balkans, with increased competition among the growing number of media sources, rising unemployment and low salaries among reporters, and ferocious dynamics in the wider sector (Vogel, 2015). As a result of these dynamics, the media systems in the Balkan countries are following a centralised trend, according to which wealthy business people (who are often also involved in the sport industry) create media houses which take over and closely manage multiple media outlets, with reporters asked to contribute to several outlets (print media, radio and television) at the same time. It is due to this blurring of the lines between journalism (in print media) and reporting (on radio and television) that the terms 'reporter' and 'journalist', and 'media' and 'press' will be used interchangeably in this study. All these factors draw a picture of the media industry in the Balkan countries; one in which a symbiotic relationship between the industry and sport has developed, providing the media with quick, easy and popular content, and sport with natural advertising. Interestingly, at the same time, the lack of integrity in these countries is also often documented (Vogel, 2015), with popular recent sport corruption scandals including match-fixing, illegal betting, bribery and extortion in professional sports and predominately football, as documented by Masters (2015) and Manoli and Antonopoulos (2015).

In the case of sport, which largely depends on public awareness and media coverage, the attitude of the media and the opinions of media representatives are absolutely crucial when looking at problems such as corruption in sport and whether and how it is reported (Boyle and Haynes, 2009). As a result, the role that the media play in reporting corruption in sport is one of particular importance in the wider effort to promote integrity (Hill, 2013) and tackle sport corruption in all its forms, including both large and small manifestations, in all professional, commercialised and non-commercialised, amateur sports. Nevertheless, and despite the important role that the media can play in corruption in sport, challenges due to a lack of resources or added pressure from the environment may similarly arise, potentially obstructing the role of the media and thus hindering them from reporting on corruption in sport. Despite the wide influence and significant power that the media hold within the sport ecosystem (Manoli, 2020), their role in reporting on corruption and any challenges they might face remains unexplored. It is these challenges to the role that the media can play in corruption in sport that this study aims to research, in order to shed light on this under-studied yet important area, using insights from difficult-to-access informed participants, members of the media, based in Croatia, Greece and North Macedonia.

## **Corruption and the media**

### *The role of media in corruption*

The media have the power to influence and shape public opinions on individuals and organisations, and to raise awareness and highlight certain issues (McCombs, 2002). Taking into consideration their abilities and power, while knowing that people who engage in illegal or criminal activities tend to prefer secrecy (Duggan and Levitt, 2002), the media and their representatives can be viewed as key stakeholders in the battle against corruption. As Stapenhurst (2000) suggested, the media should have not only the freedom to report on corruption, but also the responsibility to investigate, and to deliver new information through their investigations. Indeed, it is argued that the media's role in corruption appears to extend beyond merely informing the public about instances of corruption, to encouraging transparency by providing a protected platform for individuals who have experienced corruption to report it (Brunetti and Weder, 2003). Masters and Graycar (2015) argued that reporting on corruption can damage the reputation of organisations and individuals alike, and thus through 'naming and shaming' induce change, which, on a wider scale, as Khoo (2014) has claimed, can contribute to a general climate of transparency within a society.

Additionally, media reporting on corruption can influence how societies demand accountability, by raising public awareness, shaping public opinion and generating public pressure in order for corruption to be dealt with (Norris, 2004). In this way, the media's role against corruption is not only dual – informative and investigatory, as Stapenhurst (2000) has argued – but triple, entailing also a corrective element, since through the media's work and the pressure they can apply, they can act as a control lever against corruption (Coronel, 2010). It is this triple vital role of the media that led Schudson (2008) to argue for the wide necessity of an unlovable press.

While exploring the media's role in reporting corruption, Zipparo (1999) underlined that a significant personal risk is taken when corruption is to be exposed by individuals; and thus reporting corruption, while being important, is not a simple matter. In his work, Zipparo notes that reporting is a complex issue that depends on factors such as organisational culture and the broader environment, as well as a belief about whether reporting would make a significant difference or not. It is due to the important role that the media can play by reporting on corruption that Coronel (2010: 111) called the media a 'watch-dog' against corruption, arguing in her work that this significant role of the media is not new, but a notion that emerged more than 200 years ago. Indeed, in the sport industry, Hill (2013) reported that independent media investigations and individuals' confessions to the media account for approximately 36% of the match-fixing cases revealed worldwide, which is a substantial and indicative figure of the key role that the media can play in corruption in sport.

A vital underlining factor for the media to successfully report on corruption is arguably the freedom of the press, or in other words their independence and freedom to conduct their work uninfluenced by external factors, such as political and financial motives (Brunetti and Weder, 2003). It is argued that the latter, financial motives, might currently be considered the biggest obstacle in media reporting, since a multitude of media sources world-wide are struggling with resources, and are thus relying on commercial deals with

advertisers in order to survive (Beattie et al., 2017). These deals, while providing the media with the needed resources to continue to operate, entail additional pressures on the topics that they can report. As such, often an expectation exists that commercial partners of these media will be treated favourably when news is being reported, even if the issue reported on is indeed corruption, while additional influence might also exist on the overall topics that the media might focus upon. For example, in a comparative study by Mancini et al. (2016) that examined the different levels of press freedom in France, Great Britain and Italy, a correlation was identified between press freedom and the way in which corruption is reported in the media. Their study found that the focus in the British media is usually on corruption in international affairs and sport, while in Italy the media tend to present news on corruption with an emphasis on domestic politicians and their actions. When examining the issue of press freedom and independent reporting on a wider scale, an agreement exists that different levels of scrutiny can be found in different countries and in different sectors within them, depending again on influencing factors such as political and financial motivators (Bhattacharyya and Hodler, 2015; Blanc et al., 2017; Camaj, 2012; Dutta and Roy, 2016; Solis and Antenangeli, 2017). In line with press freedom, it is worth underlining that Reporters Without Borders (2018) outlines how reporting on corruption in countries within the Balkan region, on which this study focuses, is often met with resistance and aggravation, suggesting the existence of additional challenges in the ways in which the media can perform their role.

### *The role of media in corruption in sport*

Even though corruption in sport has been quite topical in recent years, with various manifestations being reported, the general consensus is that corruption in sport is an area that has historically been researched less than corruption in general (Manoli et al., 2020). Most modern research has focused on causes and consequences of corruption, providing a very broad scope of analysis, but some has also focused on specific cases and examples (Hill, 2010; Mazanov et al., 2012; Numerato, 2015; Spapens and Olfers, 2015). Within the latter, it is often highlighted that the studies which explore particular cases of corruption in sport have based their analysis on multiple sources of data, with national and regional media identified as a key source to 'fill in the gaps' or 'provide context' to the data acquired through informant interviews and legal files (e.g. in Manoli and Antonopoulos, 2015; Manoli, Antonopoulos and Levi, 2016; Manoli et al., 2019). As Picci (2005) argued, the media's reporting on corruption can assist not only in identifying corruption when it occurs, but also in providing valuable and often inaccessible insight to the actors and their motives, as well as why and how corruption has occurred, thus offering a thorough view of the phenomenon at hand. As such, media sources, through their informative and investigatory role, have proven invaluable not only to academic studies examining corruption in sport, but also in the wider fight against corruption in sport (Hill, 2013). As Hill (2013) argues, through investigative journalism, media reports on corruption in sport have identified and uncovered cases which, through the additional attention drawn to them by the reporting, have prompted legal action against corruptors.

At the same time, wide criticism exists that sport media, especially in western and anglophone countries, choose to refrain from investigative journalism due to the risks

and resources needed, and instead opt for simple reporting on the results of sporting events which seem to attract more and easier attention from their target audience (Boyle, 2006; Rowe, 2004, 2017). As a result, critical investigation becomes marginalised, with popular reporting turning out to be the main task that sport media are choosing (or expected) to carry out, blurring the previously existing distinction between reporting on sporting results and conducting investigations related to sports (Tomlinson, 2014). This trend has been further intensified by the introduction of digital media which increased the pressure for quick and easy news items production (Hutchins and Rowe, 2012), which, paired with the wider decrease in job security in the sport media sector (Deuze, 2011), has tilted the scale further away from investigative journalism.

Apart from the above-mentioned criticism regarding a lack of investigation, however, it is worth noting that the media have been also censured for their potential involvement in corruption in sport by Numerato (2009) and by Manoli and Antonopoulos (2015). The former, while examining the media from a theoretical point of view, suggested that 'media function as both an enemy and a facilitator of corruption in sports' (Numerato, 2009: 261), while the latter discussed their role while focusing on a particular corruption case. According to Manoli and Antonopoulos' (2015) study, the media are considered an indirect, passive or secondary actor in Greek football match-fixing, since both their (at times) selective reporting, and the personal relations that members of the media have held with bookmakers have muddied the waters of media involvement in the match-fixing case. While similar criticism has not been expressed within other academic studies, the involvement in sport corruption suggested by Numerato (2009) and Manoli and Antonopoulos (2015) hints at the existence of potential challenges to the media's role in reporting corruption, which, combined with the above discussion on the media's importance, underlines the need for further study which guided this research.

## **Methodology**

Due to the nature of the study, rich qualitative data were sought for by the researchers, who collected them through semi-structured interviews with carefully selected reporters, who are the informed participants of this study. The participants were selected based on the following two criteria; first, all participants had worked in countries with similar socio-demographic characteristics that also rank highly in the ratings of the Corruption Perceptions Index 2018 (Transparency International, 2018), all located in the Balkan region; and second, they had all been involved in reporting on corruption in sport. The two criteria were selected in order for their first-hand knowledge and informed opinions on corruption in sport and the role that the media play within it to be acquired. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, convenience sampling was initially used, by approaching members of the press known to either of the researchers, followed by 'snowballing', where a participant offered the contact information of another potential participant. A total of 20 experienced sport reporters from Croatia, Greece and North Macedonia agreed to be interviewed for this study. These three Balkan countries were chosen as the context of the study due to their similar socio-demographic characteristics, their similar ranking in the Corruption Perceptions Index, and the access that the two authors have to their respective sport industries, following their employment in professional sport in the

regions. All interviewees were men and had a minimum of 7 and a maximum of 40 years in sport media, with an average of 20 years as a sport reporter. Also, all interviewees had worked (and some are still working) in all print media, radio and television, with most being employed by multiple media at the same time, in response to the low salaries given and the centralised media systems of their countries. More information on the participants will not be provided due to the sensitivity of the topic under examination.

A set of core questions was developed in order to explore the limitations and challenges to the role of the media in reporting corruption, while, mindful of social desirability effects, efforts were made for similar questions to be asked in different ways, for interviewees to be probed to provide in-depth justifications and explanations. When interviewees were asked about corruption, no clarifications were given as to a particular type of corruption or a sport in which corruption might have occurred, in order to not influence their responses. As a result, a number of corruption manifestations were mentioned by the interviewees, including betting, match-fixing, nepotism and extortion, and ranging from a small to a large scale. The examples provided by the interviewees during the interviews were from a number of sports, with football and handball mentioned more often than others, possibly due to their commercialisation and popularity in the countries under examination.

Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted for this study between February and August 2019. Due to geographic and schedule limitations, all interviews were conducted over the phone or through video-call software. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, producing on average 10 pages of single-spaced text per interview. Manual reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) of the data was conducted in order for the codes to be detected and subsequently grouped under overarching themes and sub-themes, while the coding process was checked for both intra- and inter-coder reliability.

## Findings

### *The multifold role of media*

As was argued in all interviews conducted, the role that the media can play in corruption in sport is crucial, and multifold, similar to that which they can play in wider corruption (Akani, 2017; Coronel, 2010; Stapenhurst, 2000). According to the interviewees, the media's role is not only limited to uncovering any irregularities, reporting on them and informing the public in an honest manner, but it also extends to a corrective one, in which by covering and reporting on sport in a detailed and consistent manner, the media can assist in ensuring transparency and in preserving integrity through the pressure they place on the individuals involved in sport, as the following quote shows:

What we do is bigger than that. I mean, we of course are here to inform people and investigate a story, and we do that on an everyday basis. But we also can and do act 'correctively'. By making sure that we always report on every single thing we see or hear, we kind of 'scare people off' corruption, which is something we don't really get credit for. (Interviewee 2)

As the example used in the quote shows, the media can function in a way that goes beyond an investigatory and informative role, since certain types of media, such as

television, can sometimes act as a corrective means, analysing matches in great detail and thus sending an indirect message that all potential irregularities will be carefully analysed and eventually picked up. As a result, and due to the media's constant and vigilant reporting, it was suggested that the media can act as a deterrent to corruption, thus assuming a corrective role in addition to those of informing and investigating. Nevertheless, and despite the important role that the media can play in corruption in sport identified by all the interviewees, a number of challenges to the media's role were also highlighted through the interviews and will be discussed below.

### *Lack of media independence*

A concern expressed by the majority of the interviewees at the beginning of each discussion is the independence or lack thereof of media outlets, both in their respective countries and on a wider, international scale. The interviewees argued that most media outlets nowadays belong to wider organisations, whose owners are often in the midst of conflicts of interest. Since the media are not entirely independent, media representatives do not have the necessary freedom or even support to investigate or report on corruption:

The independence of media is the most important, that question is a really hard question, how much the media is independent in that regard . . . Today, an independent medium does not exist in the world. It definitely does not exist. It's an unreal formulation. Every medium has its owner with certain stances. (Interviewee 5)

As the quote suggests, the majority of the interviewees argued that independent media are non-existent nowadays, obstructing further the media's role in reporting corruption in sport and presenting us with a bleaker picture than the one drawn in reports about the Balkan region (Bieber and Kmezic, 2015). In fact, examples were offered in which the owners of various media outlets were closely tied up with individuals in important positions in particular sports organisations, and were thus directly influencing their content, while controlling all information that ought to be shared or not shared with the public through the outlets they owned.

This lack of media independence, according to the interviewees, is a notion that goes beyond the owners' personal interest. The majority of media outlets are often heavily dependent on advertisements and commercial sponsors, whose funding is needed in order for the media to survive, thus underlining the ferocious dynamics and pressures within the local media system (Vogel, 2015). As the interviewees argued, nowadays traditional and new media alike are struggling to secure resources to allow them to conduct their work and earn a living wage, with the proliferation of media sources in the last decade intensifying their struggle. Commercial sponsors and advertisers were thus presented as necessary in order for the media to continue to operate, with their funding often accounting for the greater part of the total income of some media outlets. As a result, according to the interviewees, any media outlet that does not comply with the interests of sponsors and advertisers would likely struggle with funding and meeting financial demands. As Interviewee 6 explained:

In a case in which, if you dig too much and investigate too much, it can happen that you will not have a lot of advertisements, because in sport, there are more, and more often, people who have big businesses and who do not have just, let's say, one business, they have many businesses, they have many friends. And what can happen is, you come across someone, (who is) close to someone else, and then you don't have advertisements.

Once again, numerous examples were offered by the interviewees, in which the individuals involved in particular sport clubs and organisations not only had the power to cut the funding for a medium, but were also able to damage it and the reporters working within it irreparably. A way in which this damage could become irreparable is through the use of 'powerful' individuals' political connections, who could in turn ensure that tax inspections and subsequent fines were imposed on the medium in question, leading it to declare bankruptcy, as Interviewee 14 disclosed about their prior experience detailed below:

We simply shared it (the corruption story) and then what happened was that after a few hours I get a call from a very important businessman and after a couple of days I had inspections in my company (sport media outlet). . . . Then you come to a point where you think whether it is even worth doing those stories, when one phone call can mess up an entire year. Because, when you get an inspection, you then know that some kind of fine will be issued, whether small or big, it all depends on how much that powerful person, close to the ruling power, will want to teach you a lesson.

Interestingly, according to the interviewee, after the fines were imposed and the medium was sold, the new buyer ended up being the businessman who was accused of being involved in the sport corruption scandal the medium was trying to expose, and who was subsequently responsible for ordering the inspection of the medium.

When the interviewees were asked whether a medium that wants to report on corruption in sport could survive without the ownership and commercial partners' pressure, all interviewees were categorical in saying that such an attempt could not survive financially. All interviewees emphasised how dire the financial situation is for most media outlets and reporters, suggesting that media independence from ownership or commercial pressures would not be possible in the current environment, as the following quote shows:

Here, journalists are paid almost nothing. You have a couple of stars, a couple of cover faces who have a decent life. When I say a couple, I may be saying too many. Others scrape through. They work for a miserable wage, if they are lucky enough to have a job. (Interviewee 18)

As such, sport journalists are told and often expected by their editors to allocate their limited time to mostly reporting on sport events and avoid investigative work on corruption that might harm themselves and the media they work for.

### *Lack of motive*

Despite the conflicting interests that were discussed above, the interviewees argued that there are few motives and even less support provided to allow for corruption in sport to be reported by the media. As a result, it was suggested that journalists often make a



rational and educated decision to simply report on other sport topics, such as what is happening on the pitch, transfers or other day-to-day occurrences, and avoid any reference to or detailed discussion of corruption in sport. As a consequence of that decision, sport media retain their informative role, and only deal with corruption in sport on rare occasions; for example, when reporting on cases that have emerged as part of a big scandal. Since many reporters and media editors make a decision to limit their scope of work to simply reporting on popular news, writing previews of and reports on matches, the often celebrated investigative function of journalism in sport (Hill, 2013) is often put aside, with sport media assuming a rather passive approach to reporting corruption in sport, which often entails assessing whether the demand for each case would be sufficient for them to report on it before they actually do:

The unwritten rule is that you first wait. You need to see if it's worth reporting or you'll end up being the martyr who wrote about it, no one saw it and you're now without a job. If it's a big case and everyone is on it, then of course we'll write about it. We have to. But after years in this you learn to not jump the gun before you know people will read it. (Interviewee 5)

As was argued by the interviewees, corruption might indeed get reported, but only after an assessment is made by the editor and an approval given by the medium's owner that the particular corruption case will be in many (if not all) competitors' media outlets soon, and that it will capture the audience's attention. If both criteria are met, journalists are given the green light to report on corruption, but only on a case-by-case basis and following the approval of both the editor and often the owner of the medium they are employed by. In most cases, however, interviewees suggested that such approval is not given, since the demand for it cannot be guaranteed, and thus the labour needed in order to prepare and produce a well-supported piece cannot be justified to the editors and the media owners. So, as the interviewees argued, editors advise journalists to focus on reporting on sporting results, transfer news and training reports, which require less time and effort, and are often associated with high readership and viewership demand.

This educated decision to avoid reporting on corruption in sport is made not only by the journalists themselves, but by media editors and owners as well, since they consider it a market-based decision made in order to protect their own investment, as Interviewee 12 explained using the example of a television channel. He argued that if a channel has bought the rights to broadcast football matches, investigating whether the said matches are indeed manipulated would ultimately damage its investment, since it could potentially make people less interested in watching them, and thus harm their viewership and subscriptions.

### *Lack of support*

The lack of support mentioned above emerged numerous times in the interviews, especially when discussing the risks associated with reporting on corruption. As the interviewees argued, the lack or inability of the wider system that would allow them to feel not only secure in their job but also personally safe is a key challenge obstructing the media from reporting on corruption, since, as they argued, whistle-blowing and reporting corruption come with a significant personal risk. As Zipparo (1999) highlighted, for

media representatives to report on corruption, a safe and well-protected environment needs to be created in order to better safeguard them from potential harm. However, as was argued repeatedly by the interviewees, such an environment is absent in the Balkan countries examined, with reporters and whistle-blowers facing tremendous personal risks while feeling exposed to potential harm, as the following quote shows:

Croatia never had a clear law about those whistle-blowers. Those whistle-blowers ended up on the street in the end, they harmed themselves in the battle against the system. In the end it turns out to be a battle with personal health. . . . When you look at those examples, you then think, why would I go, to put it this way, 'to poke the bear', if I don't see my work appreciated. (Interviewee 9)

As highlighted in the quote, since a system to protect whistle-blowers and reporters does not exist, despite the high personal risk with which reporting on corruption is associated, sport journalists are less inclined to report on corruption despite the evidence they might be in possession of. In fact, most of the interviewees were able to offer examples of cases in which corruption in sport was reported, but due to the lack of a system of protection for the reporters, they were soon found to be unemployed, prosecuted or even personally harmed. It is worth highlighting that when referring to examples of reporters who had chosen to investigate and report on corruption, the majority of the interviewees used less-flattering terms for their colleagues, as the quote from Interviewee 11 suggests:

I get why he did it (report on a fixed match). I guess he had some good info and maybe got annoyed with all the hype after the match and the result and all the celebratory coverage. But if you're asking me, I'd say that's just stupid. We all suspect and sometimes know a match is fixed, but it's not worth losing your job over it. Or worse getting your car burned down like he did. It's stupid to take the risk.

It can thus be assumed that such examples could act as discouragement for other reporters who might be interested in reporting corruption in sport, despite its prevalence in their countries' sports, as illustrated in the following quote:

There are many cases here when someone is caught (match-fixing). It is easy to see that there is a possibility of 'buying' matches, influencing transfers, that one club simply did a favour to the other, or one official to the other. That simply someone (a reporter) has a good story on the side. But (if you report it), you put yourself in an unpleasant situation, and the system, they don't care about it, you know? You are only causing problems for yourself, and you can't solve them alone. You need a synergy of the entire system. . . . And we have been seeing it, it used to happen before with someone who would go dig a bit deeper and he would not have a fun time. So those people are very quickly marginalised, put on the side, and simply nor do institutions or the media themselves have your back. (Interviewee 19)

As it is shown in the quote, this lack of a support and protection system for both the representatives of the media and other individuals who could act as whistle-blowers substantially limits the media's role in reporting on corruption, with the few reporters who despite all obstacles insist on attempting to report on corruption being the noteworthy exception to the rule in the countries studied. Interestingly, the few examples of such

reporters mentioned by the interviewees were those of retired or semi-retired journalists who occasionally report on corruption using their own media (e.g. personal websites and blogs). At the same time, the reported lack of support hinders uncovering corruption cases further by deterring potential whistle-blowers from coming forward with useful information, which, combined with the overall secrecy of corruption in sport, can further impede a reporter in uncovering the details and evidence needed in order for a corruption case to be reported.

While it is worth underlining that efforts are being made to increase the protection of whistle-blowers in the wider Balkan region as part of their anti-corruption policies and legislation, following similar international examples (Dingli, 2018), the implementation of such policies was met with criticism and even laughter by the interviewees, who argued that potential whistle-blowers are still reluctant to come forward since they are afraid that they might not be protected by the authorities. According to the interviewees, identifying and convincing potential whistle-blowers to offer information and be quoted in their media work in order to add to its credibility is a significant struggle. Despite the importance placed on including quotes from informed 'insiders' in published media work, with media editors and outlets often refusing to publish articles and air TV segments without them, identifying and most importantly convincing potential whistle-blowers to share valuable information with the media, even on an anonymous basis, was presented as considerably challenging, as the following quote shows:

In these situations, media have to be extremely precise and extremely reliant on facts, and that is hard facts, because every mistake along the way can cause a counter-process in which the media can pay big fines, if they made one wrong step. . . . I did two or three stories, two or three reports, television reports on that topic (a particular sport corruption case). It was very difficult to find real informants, so the investigation would be, how to say it, would go in the right direction, and that the investigation could come to concrete results and concrete points where you can determine that corruption happened, that match-fixing happened. (Interviewee 20)

As the interviewees argued, obtaining evidence for sport corruption cases can be quite challenging, since reporters do not hold a legal right to attain physical evidence or access to confidential documents. Similarly, access to monitoring systems that would allow them to identify potential irregularities in the betting progress around a particular sport match is also not offered to members of the media, challenging their efforts to identify evidence of corruption further. As such, and since media can be often pushed out of the anti-corruption system that is led by national and international legal authorities, national governing bodies, betting companies and other organisations, whistle-blowers are frequently their most valuable or only source of information when reporting on corruption, as they argued in the interviews:

Journalists often don't have everything to be able to uncover it. Unless a signal comes from a betting company, they don't have some special software, like betting companies and betting unions do. . . . If the police catch on with a case, and they go to investigate it, then the police have something called a court order, a warrant for a raid, they have a warrant to access the business books, to look at some bank transactions and so on. But who would give that to a journalist? All we have is people. (Interviewee 7)

This argument of the often neglected role of the media in reporting corruption emerged repeatedly in the interviews, with the interviewees suggesting that the media need to be recognised as a key stakeholder in the anti-corruption system and thus be included in information-sharing in order to be able to report on corruption and thus assist in the wider efforts to tackle corruption in sport. Until the media are included in this wider system, it was argued that the challenge to obtain evidence will remain, further obstructing the media in their role to report on corruption.

### *Conflicting personal interests*

Finally, a rather opportunistic challenge to the role of the media in reporting corruption was mentioned by half the interviewees; reporters' personal interests in the sport corruption case under examination. It was suggested that members of the media and especially sport journalists are often well integrated in the wider sport ecosystem, having developed not only professional but also personal relations with athletes, referees, agents and other key sport stakeholders. As has been argued, through these relations reporters can be provided with confidential information about a potential corruption case that might either harm any of their connections or potentially profit them or the reporters themselves, providing them with a dilemma on whether to report on the case or not. One example offered, explaining how this personal conflict might occur, involved a reporter who was presented with confidential information about a manipulated match and a betting operator advertising a preferable rate. The reporter had the choice to either report on the case in question or bet and win money based on the predetermined result. As it was argued, the reporter chose the latter, going against the code of ethics of his profession, something that half the interviewees claimed is an increasingly occurring phenomenon, as the following quote shows:

In recent years you know, betting is really growing. If you have an athlete that is close to you, who knows that something will happen, who can tell you about it, well there are definitely journalists who like to bet. In that case you cannot ever think that those journalists will work on uncovering those manipulations. (Interviewee 15)

While the existence of personal reasons for not reporting corruption in sport was expressed by only half the interviewees, their certainty that it was an often occurring yet undocumented phenomenon is worth highlighting in this study, echoing the criticism expressed by Manoli and Antonopoulos (2015) and Numerato (2009) that the media can indeed allow or facilitate for corruption to take place. It also potentially indicates that excluding the media from the wider anti-corruption system, which could be due to their members' personal conflicting interests, can in turn create a vicious circle creating the opportunity and need for such behaviour to continue.

### **Discussion and concluding thoughts**

As has emerged from the findings, the role that the media can play in corruption in sport aligns with the role they can play in corruption in general, as has been argued before

(Brunetti and Weder, 2003; Duggan and Levitt, 2002). This would entail raising awareness by informing the public of the existence of corruption when it occurs, investigating instances of corruption in order for detailed and accurate information to be provided, and acting as a means of added pressure on the sport environment in order to increase its transparency and promote its integrity. The importance of this threefold role was emphasised repeatedly by the interviewees, who argued that despite the significance the media hold as a key stakeholder of sport, a number of often insuperable challenges exist that obstruct them from performing the role. Acquiring data from difficult-to-access informed participants allowed us insights to these previously undocumented challenges, which, as presented above, range from personal to wider conflicts, and lack of motives and support.

Firstly, while press freedom was not an issue raised by the interviewees, press independence was highlighted as a key obstruction to the media's role in sport corruption. Similar to Beattie et al.'s (2017) argument, it was suggested that the media operate in an environment of external commercial pressures that influence how their role is performed. As the findings above show, this commercial influence in the context of the Balkan countries examined can even lead to media censorship, where the owners or commercial partners of media outlets have the power to control and restrict what is being reported and how. Such censorship is not what would have been expected in European, democratic, developed (Greece) and developing (Croatia and North Macedonia) countries, with research on media censorship suggesting that the phenomenon occurs mostly in African, totalitarian and underdeveloped nations (Camaj, 2012; Dutta and Roy, 2016). At the same time, it indicates that the external, commercial pressures of the media environment (Beattie et al., 2017) can intensify significantly, even to the extent where a new type of censorship is created; one that is not imposed by an authoritarian government, as argued by previous research (Camaj, 2012; Dutta and Roy, 2016), but a commercially driven censorship 'imposed' by the owners, the sponsors and the wider partners of the media outlets. This lack of media independence is further reinforced by the bad financial situation of the media sector in the Balkan countries studied, the wider proliferation of media and the close connections developed among key stakeholders of the sport system. In regard to the latter, it is worth emphasising that the existence of close political connections was mentioned repeatedly during the interviews, suggesting the existence of fertile ground for corruption to occur, as previous research on sport corruption in the region has argued (Manoli and Antonopoulos, 2015), and thus for any reporting on corruption to be consequently hindered. While the findings indicate the existence of intense financial, social and political pressures in the three countries explored, a similar picture is often drawn by reports focusing on other Balkan countries, suggesting that a potentially comparable situation might also exist within them (Bieber and Kmezic, 2015; Vogel, 2015).

Moreover, and based on the market-based decisions that media owners, editors and reporters make in order to ensure their survival and prosperity, it was suggested that corruption, despite popular belief, does not attract enough interest when reported. As a result of this lack of motive, reporters, editors and media alike make an educated decision to avoid or limit reporting on corruption in order to focus on topics that will attract the public's interest and will ensure a broader reach to their work. This would suggest that the media in the three Balkan countries studied are obstructing or limiting themselves in

reporting corruption, despite their self-proclaimed acceptance of the widely argued vital role they can play when reporting it (Akani, 2017). This choice is made due to the financial pressures of the environment in which the media operate, and potentially due to the ease associated with reporting solely on sporting results, following in the footsteps of media colleagues in western and anglophone countries, as previous research on those contexts has claimed (Boyle, 2006; Rowe, 2004, 2017). While the interviewees clarified that they are eager and often try to report on corruption, this can only be allowed following the editors' and media owners' permission, which is given after an initial assessment of the potential interest reporting on each corruption case can have, as well as on the intentions of other competing media outlets. As a result, the guidance given to reporters in the Balkan countries studied is instead to focus on easier and quicker-to-produce sport news stories, which are found to captivate a continuous and stable interest amongst the media's audience, and thus suppress the praised triple role that the media can have when reporting (Coronel, 2010; Stapenhurst, 2000). The fact that media owners, editors and journalists might choose to focus on quick and easy reporting, rather than laborious investigative journalism, has now been observed in both anglophone (Boyle, 2006; Rowe, 2004, 2017) and Balkan countries, suggesting that it is not a unique occurrence and thus potentially pointing towards a wider phenomenon in the world of media reporting, raising questions about the media's actual role in today's society and indicating the need for further study.

Additionally, it is worth highlighting that this self-censoring could also happen on an individual level, driven by either greed or selfishness, due to media representatives' personal interests. As part of the sport ecosystem, it was suggested that reporters also develop close connections with other key sport stakeholders who they might choose to protect over reporting on instances of corruption that involve them. At the same time, reporters' personal greed, or need due to the low salaries and job insecurity of the sector (Vogel, 2015), might also manifest in personal profits when, instead of reporting on match manipulations, they may opt to use their inside knowledge to bet and profit on fixed matches. It could be argued that journalists who choose not to report on corruption for personal reasons are driven by the ferocious dynamics and pressures of the media environments in the countries studied (Vogel, 2015), and even by the wider belief that, as Manoli et al. (2019) claim, corruption in sport in some Balkan countries is inevitable, due to the socio-political relations built within sport, and the inability or eagerness to improve. However, it is nonetheless important to stress that this phenomenon of self-censoring due to greed or selfishness echoes the criticism expressed towards the media by Manoli and Antonopoulos (2015) and Numerato (2009), who argued that the media, through their tolerance and connections, have allowed or even facilitated corruption in sport, while suggesting that challenges to their role are not always externally driven.

Nevertheless, even when the media are determined to play their part and report on corruption, the insuperable obstacle of the lack of support emerges, hindering reporters and potential informants from speaking up. As has been emphasised, whistle-blowers are a key and often the only source of information for reporters who often struggle to secure reliable evidence to strengthen their stories. While efforts are being made in the countries studied, both by national governments and international organisations, to introduce laws and policies, and develop networks of protection for whistle-blowers (Dingli, 2018), criticism was

expressed that they are far from being considered successful and trustworthy. As a result, and due to the lack of effective and reliable support reported, and the wider risks that speaking up about corruption entail, as Zipparo (1999) argued, journalists can face significant professional and personal challenges in their efforts to report on corruption in a well-substantiated fashion. A key issue in this challenge, as has been argued, is the wider ostracism that the media faces by the broader anti-corruption system, often led by international sport governing bodies, legal authorities and betting operators (Dingli, 2018). These organisations focus on promoting their efforts nationally and internationally, while more often than not excluding the media from their consideration, both within the Balkan region and beyond. As a result, the media are left out of the anti-corruption system, without the much-needed support in order to report on corruption, and thus perform their often-praised role in tackling corruption. As was argued by the interviewees, until the media are included and considered a key and protected part of the wider anti-corruption system, challenges to their role in reporting on corruption will remain.

## Limitations and further research

While the use of informed participants (i.e. media representatives) was deemed necessary for our study to acquire rich and difficult-to access-insights on the media's role in reporting corruption, the bias in the findings needs to be recognised. Additionally, it is worth acknowledging that due to the nature and context of this study, the transferability of the findings may be limited. Nonetheless, through this study, we do not aim to generalise the findings, but instead offer insights to challenges that the media and their representatives face when reporting on corruption in the three Balkan countries studied, which can act as an indication of similar patterns of challenges to be observed in similar cases. Future research could explore this topic on a wider scale and in similar or less similar settings, while a longitudinal study could also examine any changes in these challenges over time.

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