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Article

“Part of the Team”: In-House Sports Reporters Navigating the Journalistic Periphery

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Abstract: In recent years, the sports communication landscape has seen changes in terms of who occupies the role of sports reporter. In-house reporters, or sports communicators employed by specific clubs, teams, or leagues, now contribute content to the sports media landscape. This study explores the complicated relationship between in-house reporters’ self-perceived professional identities and in-houses reporters’ perceptions of their audiences through the lens of Bourdieusian field theory. As such, it sees in-house reporters as peripheral actors negotiating the boundaries of the sports journalism field. Through semi-structured interviews with 28 in-house sports reporters from the United States and Austria, our findings suggest that in-house reporters conceive of themselves both in relation to professional journalism and as members of the sports establishment. Furthermore, they note an ambiguous relationship to their audience, which is both reliant upon the reporters’ work, and, at times, highly critical of it.

Keywords: in-house reporters; team media; field theory; peripheral actors; audiences; sports communication



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1. Introduction

In the ever-evolving landscape of sports communication, the traditional contours of sports journalism finds itself reshaped by a myriad of peripheral actors. Once the established source in delivering sports-related information, traditional sports journalism now contends with challengers from the field’s periphery, such as team-owned and league-owned media. This shift has given rise to a complex and dynamic interplay. As established media faces challenges to its authoritative status, questions arise about the boundaries of the field, the definition of journalism, and the crucial role of audience expectations in legitimizing journalistic authority.

At the heart of this transformative period are the in-house reporters, individuals employed by sports teams or organizations, whose roles straddle the realms of journalism, storytelling, and organizational loyalty. This research explores how in-house reporters conceptualize their identities within this changing landscape and examines the intricate dynamics that define their relationship with the audience. This study unravels layers of complexity, peeling back the surface to reveal the nuanced negotiation between tradition and transformation; personal passion and professional engagement. It seeks to understand how these reporters navigate the blurred lines between journalism and organizational advocacy, and how their identities are shaped by their unique position within the sports media ecosystem.

This paper not only aims to contribute to the academic discourse on sports communication but also provides practical insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by

in-house reporters. Through qualitative analysis of interviews, we gain a deeper understanding of the tensions inherent in their roles—balancing journalistic integrity, organizational loyalty, and scrutiny of an audience that, paradoxically, both demands and critiques. In uncovering these intricate dynamics, this research sheds light on the multifaceted landscape of contemporary sports journalism, where passion meets professionalism.

1.1. Heteronomy in Field Theory

Field theory serves as a connecting link between structural functionalism and social phenomenology, offering an analysis of society at both the structural and individual levels through the interplay of various concepts (Maares and Hanusch 2022, p. 738). At its core, field theory delves into power dynamics within a field and in recent years has proven to be a valuable means for the analysis of journalism and its conversant fields. Following Bourdieu's (1986) conceptualization of the field, akin to sports, actors find themselves pulled in multiple directions with the objective of maintaining dominance. Their position within the field mirrors perceptions of professionalism and intimacy with the audience. Journalism—particularly political journalism (Perreault et al. 2023)—occupies a central hub within the field, embodying strong views of professional orthodoxy. However, this orthodoxy, which grants access to the field's resources, demands a more comprehensive understanding of peripheral actors—the heterodox players—which is precisely what this study aims to do.

The notions of core and periphery are viewed as a spectrum wherein actors exhibit varying degrees of peripherality or heterodoxy (Maares and Hanusch 2023; Hanusch and Löhmann 2023). In simpler terms, the journalistic core represents the most orthodox pole, embodying formats and journalists adhering closely to journalism's ideals and practices; these ideals tend to emphasize journalism's "social and democratic obligations" (Pihl-Thingvad 2015, p. 404). Conversely, the peripheral pole encompasses those with more deviant views and practices (e.g., Instagram influencers, in-house reporters, true crime podcasters; Maares and Hanusch 2023). The permeability of journalistic field boundaries allows new entrants, like in-house reporters, to claim legitimacy by adopting journalistic norms and functions, referring to themselves as "journalists" and embracing the field's conventions (Eldridge 2018).

In field theory, actors engage in competition for the field's scarce resources or capital, reflecting issues of scarcity (Bourdieu 1986). Resources are limited within the field, prompting actors to pursue different forms of capital and vie for them. Capital is also transferable; possessing one form of capital may not guarantee the other, but it facilitates access to it. For instance, journalists with strong economic capital may have a competitive edge in acquiring *cultural capital* (Perreault and Hanusch 2022). Similarly, those with robust *cultural capital*, such as awards and expertise, may find it easier to develop their audience, a manifestation of *social capital* (Nölleke et al. 2022). *Economic capital* is considered by Bourdieu as one of the dominant forms, alongside *cultural capital*, varying across fields (Shultz 2007). Journalists also pursue *symbolic capital*, unique to the journalistic field, signifying a rising recognition of journalism's importance by peers and social elites (Hovden 2008). For the journalistic field, we know that aspects of the field—such as *capital*—remain largely consistent across national contexts on a macro level (Perreault and Hanusch 2022). Hence, and for the purposes of this paper, we anticipate that peripheral actors in both Austria and the United States would share a similar perception of the value for awards, *cultural capital*, and a social following through social media, *social capital*. That said, at a micro level, the awards' peripheral actors would privilege and even the ideal platforms for building a social following may differ.

The competition for capital is shaped by actors' understanding of the game, reflected in the field's *doxa*, *habitus*, and *illusio*. *Doxa* encompasses the "universe of tacit presuppositions" organizing action within the field (Bourdieu 1986, p. 35). *Doxa* tends to inform what journalists tend to think of as news values. These values of course are socially constructed by dominant members of the journalistic field, who historically have tended to be rich, white, and male. Their centrality to the field then explains why, even across gender and race,

people within the journalistic field may tend to reflect the same journalistic values (Harcup and O'Neill 2017), but this also means that the peripheral pole then offers opportunities for actors to ascribe to alternative values not linked to the journalistic core. *Habitus* represents the actors' dispositions, influencing why a specific story is chosen and presented in a particular way (Benson 1999, p. 467). *Habitus* allows actors to act responsively even in difficult situations almost automatically. *Illusio* refers to the interested participation in the game, rooted in the belief in the journalistic mission of providing a public service (Bourdieu 1986, p. 228). Disillusionment may occur when preexisting ideas are not met, particularly in areas like labor conditions, even for journalists with high status and access to various forms of capital (Nölleke et al. 2022).

While research has explored peripheral and emerging practices, such as (micro-)blogging and citizen journalism, less attention has been given to in-house reporters in sports journalism. In-house reporters have been previously envisioned as having strong access to *cultural capital*—given that in-house reporters in many cases can compete successfully for the same awards as sports journalists. That said, they would certainly be conceptualized as closer to the heteronomous pole of journalism given their strong orientation toward the audience (Nölleke and Perreault 2023).

1.2. Peripheral Actors and Journalistic Identity

Extensive research has pointed to the characteristics of peripheral actors within the journalism field and explored how these actors perceive their journalistic identity (Eldridge 2019; Maares and Hanusch 2023). Various typologies and terms distinguishing peripheral actors exist, attempting to make sense of the increasingly dynamic, diverse, and de-institutionalized journalism field (Deuze and Witschge 2018; Holton and Belair-Gagnon 2018). For example, peripheral actors may be interlopers—non-traditional journalists who enter the journalism field and challenge journalistic norms (explicit interlopers) or offer “contributions or improvements” (p. 74) to the field (implicit interlopers). Alternatively, they could be intralopers, working within traditional journalism organizations but serving non-“journalism-oriented titles” (Holton and Belair-Gagnon 2018, p. 75). Furthermore, they can take agonistic or antagonistic stances toward journalistic norms and practices, differing in their critical disposition toward the field (Eldridge 2019). Holton et al. (2013) identified a key area of divergence between peripheral actors and core actors as rooted in their values: journalists tend to privilege “acting as a watchdog of powerful institutions and contributing to an informed society” and value “accuracy, autonomy, and objectivity” (p. 723); conversely, peripheral actors think of their work more as content creation and are drawn to similar newswork practices given their “social and expressive functions” (Holton et al. 2013, p. 723).

Moreover, when conceiving of the journalism field in terms of a core and periphery model, the designation of peripheral actors may not only apply to new (often digitally oriented) entrants to the field but also to certain subfields of journalism writ large. As neither the journalistic core nor the periphery represents homogenous groups or practices, then even within traditional journalism organizations, certain beats or sections exist further distanced from the traditionally conceived hard-news journalism core (Deuze and Witschge 2018; Maares and Hanusch 2020). Research on peripheral actors has then largely focused on the journalistic actors interacting most closely with the hard-news and political journalism core, reflecting the broader focus of journalism studies on the interaction between journalism and politics (Zelizer 2013).

Turning toward less-studied soft news and news pertaining to everyday life, lifestyle journalism and social media influencers also make up the journalistic actors residing in the peripheral spaces of the journalism field. For example, through an interview-based study with 19 Instagram lifestyle influencers, Maares and Hanusch (2020) found that the influencers largely “saw themselves as doing something that resembled journalism” although they did not “immediately link their work to journalism” (p. 269). The influencers did not often refer to themselves as journalists, but they did acknowledge that they produced

content that resembled journalism and enacted a set of practices similar to the process of conducting journalism. That the influencers produced content similar to lifestyle journalism and did so through micro-blogging rather than traditional soft-news journalism meant that they were peripheral actors acting within the peripheries of journalism.

1.3. In-House Sports Media as Peripheral Actors

This double-natured periphery can be extended to sports journalism as well, another subfield of journalism residing outside of the hard-news core. Within the contemporary sports/media complex, both digital sports journalists and in-house team media produce news content related to specific sports beats or teams (Nölleke and Perreault 2023; Velloso 2022). However, despite similarities in function between in-house reporters and sports journalists, in-house reporters have been portrayed as a threat to the boundaries of traditional sports journalism and the professional access of sports journalists (Mírer 2022; Nölleke and Perreault 2023).

When talking to the in-house reporters themselves, studies have found varying results in how in-house reporters conceive of their professional identities (English 2022; Mírer 2022). In some cases, research has shown that they identify with traditional sports journalists and instead distance themselves from team public relations officials. In-house reporters emphasize similarity to sports journalism, taking on journalistic titles like “writer” and “editor” and identifying themselves akin to beat writers and publicly position themselves as aimed at audiences (Mírer 2022). Compared to traditional sports journalists, English (2022) notes, in-house sports reporters tend to be more sparing in critical coverage and public interest.

Interviews with in-house reporters point to journalism ethics as a key marker by which the reporters align themselves with traditional sports journalism in service to their readership rather than to their team (Mírer 2019). In that regard, the in-house reporters draw a boundary between the commercial nature of the sports industry and their storytelling role. However, despite the work in-house reporters perform to develop a professional identity as journalistic actors, Mírer (2019) contends that, given the institutional structure of their profession, the in-house reporter “has a commercial mission couched in journalistic terms” (Mírer 2019, p. 83). Conversely, research has also found that in-house reporters specifically do not want their work to be confused with journalism. To be perceived as journalists would then require those in-house reporters to acquiesce to traditional journalistic norms and standards (Nölleke and Perreault 2023). These inconsistencies in how in-house reporters perceive their professional identities ultimately illuminate the tensions existing between the in-house reporter’s perceived professional identity and their connection to the commercial interests of their teams. This is not unlike the tension between lifestyle journalists and lifestyle influencers who both promote products, engage in aspirational labor, and offer “acts of journalism” (Örnebring et al. 2018, p. 418; Hanusch et al. 2020; Maares and Hanusch 2020; Perreault and Bélair-Gagnon 2022).

1.4. Peripheral Actors and Their Audience

Even though there are no consistent findings on the extent to which in-house reporters see themselves as journalists, their offerings may be perceived as functionally equivalent (Schapals et al. 2019) by audiences regardless of their journalistic identity. In this context, scholars have argued that peripheral actors’ sports coverage can certainly claim superiority over traditional media (Rojas-Torrijos and Nölleke 2023), as it can offer more specialized insights, faster news, and more exclusive information, as well as greater proximity to the protagonists with authentic behind-the-scenes insights.

This is especially true for in-house reporters, who rely on privileged access to teams and athletes and can therefore build their coverage on a large amount of sporting capital (Mírer 2022). While there is still a lack of empirical evidence on the role of in-house reporting in sports fans’ media consumption, early indications suggest that sports audiences value this direct access to sports stakeholders and follow teams’ and athletes’ own media

accounts extensively (Mirer 2019). Consequently, journalism research urgently needs to consider reporting by content creators beyond professional journalists, as it may very well look and feel like news and journalism to users (Broersma 2019; Maares and Hanusch 2022). As Swart et al. (2022, p. 10) argue, “[w]hat is experienced as relevant, important and timely information by audiences might, but does not automatically, align with what is produced by professional journalists”. In being perceived by the audience as functionally equivalent or even superior, in-house reporters compete (consciously or unconsciously) with established media for legitimacy. This is because legitimacy, which in turn underpins the cultural authority of news producers, depends crucially on public acceptance (Tong 2018). Being accepted by the public is therefore a basic prerequisite for claiming membership in the journalistic field. It is therefore necessary—especially in highly competitive fields such as sports reporting—to incorporate the expectations of the audience into one’s own reporting (Velloso et al. 2022). However, such an orientation toward audience expectations has long been condemned in journalism and seen as a threat to journalistic quality (Costera Meijer 2020).

This devaluation of the audience has significantly changed in the course of digitalization. Journalists have increasingly recognized the need to refer to audience expectations to avoid being marginalized by new entrants to the field. Reflecting on audience expectations can help journalists from both the core and the periphery of the field to differentiate themselves from competitors. By basing their work on imagined audiences (Nelson 2021; Coddington et al. 2021), they can focus on “generating unique content” (Nelson and Lei 2018, p. 629) that sets them apart. In this sense, discursive reference to serving a particular audience can be conceptualized as a strategy of journalistic boundary work (Kotisova 2022); the audience itself could then be considered a boundary marker in the discursive construction of what journalism is. Although legitimacy in news production is ultimately conferred by the public, research has surprisingly rarely examined the extent to which news producers refer to a (unique) audience in order to legitimize their own work, delegitimize that of competitors, and thus grant or deny membership in the field.

This is especially true for the field of sports communication, which has not even seen the arrival of an audience turn that has been discussed in general journalism research for some time (Costera Meijer 2020; Swart et al. 2022). This is surprising, to say the least, given the fierce competition in the field of sports media, the enormous threats to established journalism, particularly in the field of sports, and the urgent (and long-standing) calls to examine audience expectations in sports communication research (Hardin 2005; Sherwood et al. 2017). With the present study, we respond to these calls by examining how in-house reporters envision their audiences and what role they ascribe to them. In terms of (journalistic) identity, audience references are particularly meaningful as they reveal how in-house reporters, as peripheral actors in sports journalism, situate themselves in the journalistic field. Concepts of audience can therefore be of particular value in identifying implicit identities that may not be explicitly expressed. In Bourdieusian terms, the investigation of the imagined and experienced audience helps us to examine whether in-house reporters position themselves more at the autonomous or heteronomous pole of the sports journalistic field.

With this study, we seek to position in-house reporters within the broader field of sports journalism, assessing the extent to which they (intend to) disrupt this field. We approach this goal by paying particular attention to in-house reporters’ concepts of identity and their perceptions of and experiences with audiences. As argued above, these aspects are particularly informative for understanding the discursive construction of belonging. Our arguments lead us to ask the following questions:

RQ1: How do in-house reporters conceptualize their identity within the field?

RQ2: How do in-house reporters conceptualize their relationship to the audience?

2. Materials and Methods

To address our research questions, the research team conducted semi-structured interviews with 28 in-house reporters from two countries: 9 from Austria and 19 from the United States. Austria and the US exhibit differences in their journalistic cultures and sports media ecosystems (Esser 1998; Hallin and Mancini 2004). However, both countries face similar challenges related to field insurgency and boundary challenges with the introduction of new heterodox actors, as with in-house reporters (Nölleke and Perreault 2023; Perreault and Hanusch 2022), which reflects a long tradition of shared intellectual-professional connection between the two countries (Cockett 2023). Therefore, reflecting on shared challenges among in-house media reporters in these diverse environments is valuable, given the widespread phenomenon of the “soft boundary” in journalism (Perreault and Hanusch 2022, p. 15; also, Banjac and Hanusch 2022; Hanusch and Löhmann 2023; Maares and Hanusch 2022).

Throughout the interviews, the research team observed that in-house reporters, despite operating in different environments, responded in a similar manner. This led us to consider the interviews as a unified corpus. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, aiming to include a broad range of perspectives within the specified purpose (Koerber and McMichael 2008, p. 464). In-house reporters were defined as individuals creating content disseminated through sports organizations’ digital channels, primarily team websites or social media.

Our study included participants from well-known teams such as National Basketball League (NBA), National Hockey League (NHL), or National Football League (NFL) teams in the US and Bundesliga soccer teams in Austria as well as college teams and niche sports teams in order to capture diverse perspectives on sports journalism’s role in the communication ecology (Nölleke and Birkner 2019). The final sample of 28 interviewees included 19 from high-profile teams and 9 from college or niche sports teams, with ages ranging from 21 to 60, most falling in their late 20s or early 30s. While 18 had prior journalism experience, the average current position experience was four years. Notably, only 5 respondents identified as female, highlighting the male-dominated nature of the field (Mirer 2019, 2022). Table 1 provides an overview of the distribution of nationality, gender, sport, team level, work experience, and interview IDs.

Interviews were conducted by trained research students between March and June 2022, lasting between 41 and 62 min, with an average duration of 46 min. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 5 team media reporters, while 23 were conducted via Zoom, a method successfully applied in qualitative research (Archibald et al. 2019). Qualitative interviews were chosen to explore professionals’ personal identities and perceptions of the audience, allowing participants to discuss their perspectives freely (Magnusson and Marecek 2015, p. 46). The semi-structured guideline covered professional practices, personal identities, audience perceptions, club status, and the role of in-house media in the field. Thematic analysis of recorded and transcribed interviews was conducted using a constant comparative approach in a shared Google Sheet, combining deductive and inductive coding. The Results Section includes quotes from interviews annotated with participants’ identification numbers (IDs).

Table 1. Study participants.

ID	Country	Gender	Sport	Pro Level	Former Journalist
ID01	US	Male	Baseball	yes	yes
ID02	US	Male	American Football	yes	no
ID03	US	Male	Ice Hockey	yes	no
ID04	US	Male	Athletics	no	yes
ID05	US	Male	Basketball	yes	no
ID06	US	Male	Basketball	no	yes
ID07	US	Male	Basketball	yes	yes
ID08	US	Female	American Football	yes	yes

Table 1. Cont.

ID	Country	Gender	Sport	Pro Level	Former Journalist
ID09	US	Female	American Football	no	yes
ID10	US	Male	Basketball	yes	yes
ID11	US	Male	American Football	yes	yes
ID12	US	Male	Ice Hockey	yes	yes
ID13	US	Female	American Football	yes	yes
ID14	US	Male	Basketball	yes	no
ID15	US	Female	Ice Hockey	yes	yes
ID16	US	Male	Ice Hockey	yes	no
ID17	US	Male	Ice Hockey	yes	yes
ID18	US	Male	Baseball	no	yes
ID19	US	Male	Ice Hockey	yes	yes
ID20	Austria	Female	American Football	no	yes
ID21	Austria	Male	Soccer	no	yes
ID22	Austria	Male	Soccer	yes	yes
ID23	Austria	Male	Soccer	yes	no
ID24	Austria	Male	Soccer	yes	no
ID25	Austria	Male	Soccer	no	no
ID26	Austria	Male	Rugby	no	no
ID27	Austria	Male	Dancing	no	no
ID28	Austria	Male	Tennis	yes	yes

3. Results

3.1. Who Is an In-House Sports Reporter?

In regard to RQ 1, in-house reporters conceived of their identities in a somewhat contradictory manner. The journalists were split in terms of how they discussed their professional identities: (1) many noted their roles as something akin to journalists or even as journalists or beat reporters explicitly, yet (2) others defined themselves explicitly against journalists or the journalism profession. Noting the differences between their roles and that of newspaper or national journalists, multiple of the in-house reporters conceived of themselves as “part of a team” (Participant 10). Furthermore, within their responses to questions as to how they got into the field and their favorite parts of the job, many of the in-house reporters also noted their passion for sports and passion for the specific team or organization they cover.

Although employed by a team or sporting organization rather than a newspaper or national news outlet, multiple of the in-house reporters considered themselves journalists. For some, their self-perceived identity as journalists was forthright. For example, an in-house reporter for an NHL team called himself a journalist explicitly, stating that “the best part about being a journalist is the realization that you have a great story” (Participant 16). Similarly, other participants referred to themselves as writers undertaking sports writing and reporting jobs (Participant 9, 11, 16, 21). Participant 12 went so far as to draw a parallel between in-house reporting and being a beat writer, given the in-house reporters’ specific focus on one team rather than an entire league or region. Their ability to build trust with players and the act of “being there, being at practice, being in the locker room. . .not just showing up to the games” is the “chief benefit of being a beat reporter” that Participant 12 noted in their role as an in-house reporter for an NHL team.

Rather than outright calling themselves journalists or beat reporters, multiple of the in-house reporters referred to their professional identity as journalists inadvertently by defining their daily duties as similar to those of journalists. When talking about the skills needed to be an in-house reporter, they noted their identity as storytellers (Participants 8, 9, 11, 16) and informers (Participants 3, 4, 12, 15, 17). To be a storyteller or an informer then requires “curiosity” because “all good journalists are curious” (Participant 9) and the ability to “be a good communicator and have really good attention to detail” (Participant 8). The in-house reporters noted taking part in common journalistic practices like conducting

interviews and writing stories, at times on a short deadline. According to one of the reporters, the roles and practices across traditional journalism and much of in-house reporting remain the same; they both share identities as sports storytellers. The main difference between the two is simply the medium of their stories' consumption by the audience (Participant 3).

However, that reporter's sentiment did not coincide with all of the in-house reporters interviewed. Rather, multiple of the reporters conceived of their identities as something explicitly not journalistic (Participants 2, 10, 14, 18, 24, 25, 26, 28). Some reporters noted that, in taking an in-house role, they were "leav[ing] sports journalism behind" (Participant 28). This decision to leave journalism brought with it benefits like no longer being "a slave to the 24/7 news cycle" (Participant 10) and the opportunity to be "your own boss," and "your own editor" (Participant 17). One in-house reporter even noted that they pursued their in-house role in part because of the lack of trust in news in general:

I was a journalism major the first year and a half of college but didn't want to be depicted as a bad guy since they get a lot of hate. I moved to sports media because I saw it as more fun and laid back. (Participant 18)

Interestingly, rather than noting their specific role or identity as in-house reporters or team media, the reporters simply defined themselves as not journalists. This then begs the question that, if these in-house reporters do not "want to be the same as a journalist" or for a "journalist to be the same as [them]" (Participant 24), but they engage in storytelling roles similar to those of journalists, then what do they identify as?

A unifier among the in-house reporters who identified as journalists (or at least similar to them) and the reporters who did not was their identity as part of the team or organization they represent. Being a part of the team afforded the reporters both community and benefits for their storytelling. For one of the reporters, the communal aspect of their job for an NBA team was a welcome change from their previous role as a journalist:

Well, I'll say this, newspapers are not a team. If you go into a situation where you're with a news outlet, even if it's ESPN or whoever, you're not part of a team. You're in it for yourself because everyone is trying to further their career. I'm not saying that's not the case at a team, but I'm here to tell you that there is very much a team friendly attitude here at [my team]. . . It's a team thing. I really enjoy that. I haven't had that in about 40 years with the newspapers I've been involved with. (Participant 10)

For other reporters, the sense of being part of a team resulted from the smaller scale of a team operation than a large national newspaper or outlet. Multiple of the reporters working for small soccer clubs within subdivisions of the Bundesliga noted that the team and their audience of fans felt like "family" (Participant 25) or "my second family" (Participant 24). One of the Bundesliga reporters even noted that the team (and the pitch) is their "second living room" (Participant 24).

Working for a smaller-scale organization and being a part of the team brought with it both a general increase in access to athletes and opportunities for more in-depth storytelling as well as some limitations on the types of stories and content the reporters produce. For example, multiple of the reporters noted their closeness (in terms of proximity) to the athletes they report on due to working within the same building or within the same organization. An in-house reporter for an NFL team stated they could simply text or call one of the athletes to discuss a story if needed (Participant 11). Distinguishing this level of access from that of traditional journalists, an in-house reporter for a dance team noted that traditional journalists' "superficial reporting can only offer initial contact at most". Meanwhile, in-house reporters, "can offer contact right up to the dance floor" (Participant 27). This closeness to the team is beneficial for both the audiences seeking in-depth coverage and for the athletes seeking a trusted source for reporting. Especially given the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its negative impact on reporters' access to

locker room interviews (Participants 8, 10), the potential for easier access to athletes seems to be a clear benefit of their roles as in-house reporters.

However, due to being “one of the club” (Participant 24) rather than a traditional journalist, the reporters noted limitations on their journalistic authority in terms of storytelling. For example, a reporter for an NHL team acknowledged that they “are a little bit more limited in what [they] say and how [they] present things” (Participant 15). For some, their identity as an “employee of the club at the end of the day” (Participant 22) means that they ultimately “report from the club’s point of view” (Participant 24). In that sense, a contrast emerged when considering the in-house reporters’ autonomy according to their identities and roles as part of the team. On the one hand, they can “be more personal with players” (Participant 24) and “expand on things in the story” (Participant 23) to provide informational and entertaining content for their audiences. However, there is a sense of duty to the team and wanting the team to succeed that limits their ability to report negatively on the team.

Additionally, the interviews with in-house reporters reveal a narrative about the intrinsic connection between their roles as reporters and their passion for sports. A majority of these reporters do not perceive their work merely as a profession but as an extension of their love for the sport or team they cover, if not sports in general. The reporters identified these roles as related to passion for sports and reporting (Participant 3, 5, 13, 18, 24, 26, 28), affiliation and connection to specific teams (Participant 5, 13, 14, 15), personal journey and professional growth (Participant 5, 15, 16), role of passion in professional success (Participant 3, 5, 14, 18, 24), and enthusiasm for specific sports and clubs (Participant 25, 27).

The qualitative analysis of interviews with in-house reporters revealed a pervasive theme underscoring the foundational role of passion in shaping their professional trajectories within sports journalism. Participant 24 articulated a profound connection, stating, “I grew up with it, it’s my second living room”. Similarly, Participant 13 conveyed a sentiment indicative of many respondents, asserting that their work “doesn’t even feel like work because I love sports so much”. Participant 3 emphasized this connection, expressing that he has “always been a hockey fan” and is now “living the dream” by writing about what he loves. These expressions highlight the intrinsic relationship between personal interests in sports and the reporters’ professional engagements, suggesting that passion serves as a pivotal motivator and sustainer in their roles.

A notable aspect emanating from the interviews was the sense of affiliation and personal fulfillment derived from specific team or sport affiliations. For instance, Participant 15’s decision to work for his team was underpinned by a deep-seated love for the city he was working in, illustrating the alignment between personal passions and professional roles. Furthermore, Participant 14’s rationale for covering a particular rivalry game reflected the significance of personal connections with teams in shaping professional trajectories. Participant 5 echoed this sentiment, stating they are “able to wake up every day and cover the basketball team that [they] grew up being a huge fan of”. These narratives collectively underscore that the roles of in-house reporters often extend beyond mere professional obligations, serving as platforms for personal fulfillment and alignment with deeply cherished interests.

The data elucidated a recurring theme surrounding the transition from sports enthusiasts to professionals within the realm of sports journalism. Participant 15’s journey, catalyzed by an acquaintance’s recognition of her unwavering attention to the game, exemplified the seamless integration of personal interests with professional pursuits. Parallely, Participant 26’s trajectory, evolving from a player in 1989 to a multifaceted role encompassing communication and social media, highlighted the fluidity and interconnectedness of personal passions and professional growth trajectories. Participant 5 reinforced this perspective, emphasizing the importance of being passionate about the sport one covers to sustain longevity in the field. These narratives collectively illuminate the organic evolution of roles, suggesting that personal affinities often serve as catalysts propelling individuals toward professional engagements within sports journalism.

The findings also illuminated nuanced perspectives surrounding the navigation of intersections between objectivity and fandom among in-house reporters. Participant 16's advice to aspiring journalists emphasized the imperative of maintaining a semblance of impartiality, advocating for initial engagements with teams that one remains "nearly impartial to". Such insights underscore the complexities inherent in balancing personal affiliations with journalistic integrity. Participant 5 further elaborated on this, stating, "If you are not a fan of basketball or whatever sport you are covering, you won't last very long". These findings collectively highlight the nuanced approaches adopted by reporters in reconciling personal passions with professional obligations, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of roles within sports journalism.

The narratives further provided insights into future aspirations and trajectories, with several respondents articulating their roles as steppingstones toward broader professional horizons. Participant 13's perspective underscored this sentiment, emphasizing the transient nature of her current role and envisioning future engagements within sports. Such insights elucidate the dynamic and evolving nature of roles within sports journalism, with respondents continuously adapting and evolving to align with shifting landscapes and aspirations. These findings collectively illuminate the fluidity inherent in professional trajectories, underscoring the adaptability and resilience demonstrated by in-house reporters within the realm of sports journalism.

In summary, the findings elucidate a multifaceted landscape characterized by the foundational role of passion, palpable affiliations, organic transitions from enthusiasts to professionals, nuanced navigation of intersections between objectivity and fandom, and dynamic future aspirations among in-house reporters within sports journalism. These insights collectively underscore the intricate interplay between personal passions and professional engagements, highlighting the complexities, challenges, and opportunities inherent in roles within this dynamic and evolving domain. Future research may further explore the implications of these findings, elucidating strategies to harmonize personal affinities with professional obligations effectively within the realm of sports journalism.

3.2. A Critical Audience

In regard to RQ 2, in-house reporters conceptualized their relationship with the audience as an ambiguous one, reflecting a one-way relationship in which in-house reporters (1) try to provide the content they perceive their audience desiring and yet (2) do not necessarily receive the enthusiasm they would expect.

In general, respondents attribute a crucial role to their audiences, with audience engagement being the key driver of their work. However, they do not address them primarily as media recipients, but rather as actual and potential consumers of tickets and team merchandise. In this way, reaching the audience through in-house reporting serves a higher purpose and ultimately aims to support the teams' commercial and sporting objectives. As Participant 22 states: "It's about retaining your own community and keeping them loyal to the club. Not only for a good atmosphere, but also for more sales, in ticketing, merchandising, gastronomy & Co. but also to win new fans, whether young or old, girls or boys".

For our respondents, public acceptance is therefore very important, but their legitimacy as in-house reporters is not sufficiently based on acceptance by the interested public. This acceptance only becomes valuable when it is transferred to the consumption of team-related consumer products (e.g., purchasing tickets, merchandise, etc.). However, as the respondents see their reporting as a basic prerequisite for such acts of consumption, they endeavor to create media products that precisely meet the expectations of the public. This automatically puts them in competition with professional journalists, even if they emphatically deny that they are acting as competitors. When they differentiate their work from that of journalists, they refer precisely to different target groups and different audience-related goals.

However, asking the in-house reporters about their relationship to and expectations of their audience, they reveal remarkably little knowledge of its characteristics and expectations of in-house reporting. Rather, they seem to be caught on the wrong foot when asked about their audience. Using the common refrain, in interviews, in-house reporters in both Austria and the US responded to the questions regarding the audience with “that’s a good question” (e.g., Participant 5, 7, 25).

When asked to think more closely about their relationship with audiences, in-house reporters largely perceived their work as being in the service of like-minded fans, suggesting high potential for identification, because—as shown—our respondents also see themselves primarily as fans of their team. As Participant 11 put it, “we just want to reach our fans first yeah so we want to, you know, we want to, we would like to create you know we’d like to have more Saints fans”. Similarly, Participant 9 argued “initially, my audience was primarily Clemson Fans. But as I started to kind of branch out a bit more and do more recruiting stories, I feel like my audience has gotten broader”. Both of these point toward the fan community as being central, if not the main, audience for in-house reporters. Our respondents consider this to be one of the key differences to professional journalists. While they primarily address and reach fans, established sports media have access to a broader public. Based on that connection, Participant 20 states “it’s simply that the team media operate to a certain extent in their own bubble, which we naturally try to expand by all means”. This suggests that when in-house reporters talk about audience and audience acceptance, they are not referring to this in order to assert membership in the journalistic field, but to emphasize the unbroken importance of established media. In this sense, audiences are introduced as boundary markers, but interestingly not to locate their own reporting in the vicinity of traditional sports journalism, but to clarify their own non-belonging to the journalistic field.

Nevertheless, the interviewees take established sports media as a benchmark when discussing what their audience actually expects from their offerings. They assume that fans primarily expect to be informed about current developments at the club and upcoming events, as evidenced by Participant 25 stating “I think our people expect simple information about what happens where and when. Just to know, ok, there’s the next match or how it went”. This applies in particular to clubs from smaller leagues in Austria, which are not covered extensively by traditional media. In terms of audience expectations, respondents also believe that audiences are accustomed to high-quality products in terms of presentation formats, which is a standard that internal reporting must adhere to. These findings suggest that the imagined audiences of in-house reporters have similar expectations of in-house media and professional journalism, indicating that the respective content may indeed feel like journalism and hence as functionally equivalent.

At the same time, however, the interviewees recognize clearly different audience expectations of their own offerings and those of traditional sports journalists. They suggest that audiences expect, firstly, greater proximity to teams and athletes, secondly, far more extensive coverage of the club than by more general sports journalists, and thirdly, far less critical coverage driven by fandom rather than journalistic norms. Participant 22 refers to the expectations of audiences on social media stating “On Instagram, for example, [the fan] wants proximity to the players or photos of players in situations other than perhaps in the game. Players in their private clothes, players in the dressing room, players being silly”. This suggests that our respondents are indeed trying to claim legitimacy for their own reporting by referring to (imagined) audience expectations—albeit more in the sense of positioning their own work on the margins or even beyond the boundaries of the journalistic field. Obviously, in-house reporters invoke audience expectations to legitimize why they follow journalistic practices but not journalistic norms.

All this raises the question of what heuristics such notions of audience expectations are based on. The findings suggest that in-house reporters attempt to collect some audience data and build their image of the audience based on clicks, likes, and comments. While more qualitative interactions are rare, respondents still refer to feedback on their work

influencing their reporting. Some audience suggestions can actually be implemented as stated by Participant 22: “[...] it’s important to us what people say about it [our media work]. And they also provide some good ideas. Some of it is bullshit, but some of it is good”. However, feedback rarely relates to in-house reporters own media work, but rather to the content of their reporting. Nevertheless, it is striking that the direct feedback on their own reporting is so ambiguous. While one may expect that fans who identify themselves with the club would unreservedly appreciate the work of reporters who also identify themselves as fans, the respondents surprisingly often experience negative feedback. In that connection, they experienced that what they provided was met with criticism and at times hostility from their audience. Participants, particularly those from the US, saw their audience as “ruthless—you mess up one word and the Twitter world goes nuts” (Participant 19). Primarily this strong criticism was perceived as coming part-and-parcel with use of social media platforms given that “you’re going to get negative comments and that’s just part of the business” (Participant 5). Participants tried to be understanding that perhaps it was the platform or the anonymity that led to the criticism.

At other times, the participants felt that there were things they had done, out of their control, that explained the hostility. For example, Participant 14 argued “my audience hates me. I’m unique in that I don’t live in the city that I cover so a lot of people discredit me because I don’t live there”. Participant 3 similarly made a choice to live tweet a missed hockey play, and the audience responded with harsh criticism.

Like, for example, the other night, we’re losing four-nothing in Ottawa, and I tweet about Brady Skjei rings one off the post, and people are like, “Oh, this is what we’re reporting now”. And it’s like, you know, I get it. It’s frustrating. You have to find the balance. (Participant 3)

Participants were torn about the utility of audience feedback, with particularly early career in-house reporters craving feedback: “But what I will say is, especially being new to the position, I like feedback, because if people don’t like a certain way I’m doing something I’d rather know” (Participant 3). At the same time, participants—including Participant 3—felt that it was dangerous to take this feedback too seriously. As Participant 19 noted, “I have watched too many people within the industry go into a downward spiral after they react to people. That will not be my story.”

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Research on peripheral actors denotes the unique opportunities and precarities of the work. Peripheral actors are often granted opportunity to engage in content creation (Holton et al. 2013) through *aspirational labor*, doing as a job that offers what many pay to do (Duffy 2017). Yet, at the same time, they find themselves often in precarious working situations, serving at the whim of the gig economy (Eldridge 2018; Perreault and Bélair-Gagnon 2022).

This study offers valuable insight into the identity and role of a particular breed of peripheral actor—in-house sports reporters. In regard to RQ 1, this study found that in-house reporters conceived of their identities in two ways. First, in-house reporters conceived of themselves in relation to journalism—at times conversant with journalists and at other times in opposition to journalism—and as fans. Their ambivalence perhaps reflects “the embeddedness of news creation in everyday life, to the point that creators do not view their actions as being related to...journalism” (Holton et al. 2013, p. 731). In other words, the value for the content creation was attached to more to the social and expressive practices that journalists also use more so than any of the normative values that drive journalism. Furthermore, and consistent with Mirer (2019), in-house reporters here saw journalism ethics as a place of departure between the work of in-house reporting and sports journalism. In regard to RQ 2, in-house reporters conceptualized their relationship with the audience as surprisingly ambiguous. In-house reporters perceived themselves as laboring intensively to serve the needs and interests of the audience, an audience that sometimes lacked enthusiasm for what the respondents provided.

Taken together, this would seem to reflect that in-house reporters are a unique breed of peripheral actors. In-house reporters often described themselves as part of the team, perhaps not on par with the athletes on the team, but as integral as many of the league and team managers. Yet, despite their view of themselves as fans, and fellow teammates, in-house reporters reflected some level of frustration that they were not necessarily treated by the audience in this way. Given the stability afforded by working for a sports league or a sports team (Mírer 2019), it may be that in-house reporters rather expected that they could take the interest of the audience for granted. In-house reporters, after all, defined themselves in some way in relation to their closest cousin—the sports reporter—and within journalism, the sports reporter has often been perceived as the economic engine of the news industry due to their tie to the audience (Perreault and Nölleke 2022; Nölleke and Perreault 2023). This close audience tie would intuitively seem to come part-and-parcel with an in-house reporter position, given that they work for the sports establishment (Mírer 2019). However, this study reveals that this is not the case and, in fact, in-house reporters expressed many of the audience frustrations commonly shared among sports journalists and journalists of all types. In-house reporters may even perceive these frustrations more acutely given that they perceive themselves to be part of the team—in other words, on a level with the fans of the sports establishment and perhaps even deserving of privileged treatment given their perceived role in the team's function.

When we look at our findings through the lens of field theory, we realize—once again—how diverse the periphery of journalism is. In fact, even our respondents are divided on whether they feel they belong within the journalistic field or not. However, if we refer to the dimensions of the journalistic field outlined by Maeres and Hanusch (2023) and pay particular attention to the interviewees' ideas of identity and audience, it seems plausible to assign the in-house reporters to both the heterodox and heteronomous poles of the field. The fact that they see themselves as fans of the team, describe access to it as the decisive advantage of their work, and ultimately aim for economic and subsequently sporting access to the team points to the strong position of sporting capital for their work. It would therefore appear that in-house reporting is largely driven by sporting rather than journalistic considerations. While respondents claim not to have a clear picture of their audience, they are nevertheless aware that they are serving the needs of a niche group, namely their fans. This shows that the quality of in-house reporting is not primarily related to journalistic standards, but rather to meeting very specific audience needs. While hesitation in answering audience questions could be interpreted as an indicator of autonomy from audiences, it rather seems to be evidence that audience interest is taken for granted, despite the seemingly ambivalent perception of audiences held by in-house reporters.

Interestingly, our respondents do not tend to refer to their identity and audience in order to claim belonging to the field, but rather to set themselves apart and place themselves beyond the boundaries—even if they refer to carrying out the same practices as professional journalists. By seeing themselves as fans serving a fan audience, they conceptualize themselves as inferior to what professional journalists offer. This points to the difficult role of autonomy in field-theoretical perspectives on journalism. Yes, in-house reporters experience different external influences that guide their reporting. However, from their perspective, it is this that grants them autonomy from other constraints, particularly those expressed through journalistic norms that are perceived as restrictive.

While research has shown how peripheral actors in other beats strive for belonging, in-house reporters do not want to be confused with journalists. Even if they have journalistic training and even identify themselves as journalists, this identification relates more to their practices. Our results show that identity goes beyond these self-concepts. Here, our study shows that the designation as a journalist is primarily based on journalistic practices and does not necessarily include norms, etc.

All studies have limitations and this study is no different. In particular, it is worth noting that, conversant with much prior research in sports media, our sample is dominantly male. Given that research suggests that women tend to have more hostile experiences

in sports and various media domains (Crawford 2023; Cunningham et al. 2017; Schoch 2013; Ward 2015), it is possible that our findings may have been different, particularly in regard to dealings with the audience, had we had a stronger female presence in our sample. Furthermore, it is possible that the types of in-house settings chosen (primarily men’s-only teams and leagues) may have shaped the findings as opposed to if the findings had instead reflected women’s-only sports leagues and teams (see Antunovic et al. 2023).

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