Covering the Games:
Examining the relationship between
the International Olympic Committee
and sports journalists through the
lens of defensive mediatization

Aaron Gallagher, B.A., M.A.

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Dublin City University

Supervisor: Dr. Neil O'Boyle

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<u>Declaration:</u>

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Signed:

Candidate: Aaron Gallagher

Student ID Number: 14512503

Date: 27th of August 2025

List of Publications & Presentations

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"In a time of deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act."

George Orwell

"A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us."

Franz Kafka

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Covering the Games: Examining the relationship between the International Olympic Committee and sports journalists through the lens of defensive mediatization

Aaron Gallagher, Dublin City University

Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the complex relationship between the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and sports journalists via the theoretical lens of mediatization. The study uses 50 in-depth interviews with journalists, broadcasters, IOC officials and Olympic sports experts as the primary source of data. Historically, sports organisations and media members have maintained a mutually-beneficial, symbiotic working relationship, with each party using the other for different professional purposes. The media requires sports organisations for online articles, column inches, videos, podcasts and news reports. In turn, organisations such as the IOC use journalists to generate positive coverage of their events and to uphold its image and reputation. This study examines how the relationship between the IOC and sports journalists has deteriorated over time due to the consistent application of restrictive media tactics which are strategically implemented to impede journalists. Sports organisations use both 'offensive' and 'defensive' mediatization strategies in tandem to elicit media attention and to deflect from press scrutiny when necessary. Due to challenging working conditions resulting from these defensive mediatization strategies, Olympic journalists find it increasingly difficult to provide the same level of in-depth coverage of the IOC and the Olympics than in the past. This has resulted in many Olympic journalists leaving the profession and others instead switching sides to work for sports organisations in-house. This study adds new empirical evidence towards an expanded understanding of mediatization by analysing the impact of defensive mediatization. By doing so, this study contributes new knowledge towards contemporary discussions about sports journalism's future viability and the underlying motivations behind sports organisations communications policies.

<u>Preface: Echoes of the 1924 Paris Olympics a century later</u>

One hundred years ago, a pioneering French sports journalist made history. The 1924 Paris Olympics was the first edition of the Games to utilise radio and Edmond Dehorter became the very first broadcaster to commentate live on the Olympic Games. It was a ground-breaking moment. Followed by the first use of live television at the Olympics midway through the 20th century and the incorporation of social media in the 21st century, each technological leap bookmarked the Olympics' evolving relationship with media. As noted by Boyle (2012) in his description of the development of sports journalism: 'Each new media technology, initially radio, then television, and finally the Internet, changed the relationship between sport and those tasked with professionally reporting and making sense of it for a readership' (95). Initially nicknamed 'the unknown speaker' and later 'the father of sports commentary', Mr. Dehorter experienced first-hand what it felt like to be censored at the Paris Games back in 1924, before going on to make history with his radio broadcast. Jealous of his abilities to broadcast with this exciting new piece of radio technology, his colleagues in the written press sought a banning order on him. In effect, Mr. Dehorter was told he was not allowed to commentate on the Olympics for Radio Paris due to his perceived 'unfair advantage' (Balf 2024). Journalists in the written press were envious that Mr. Dehorter could immediately inform the public about sporting events. It omitted the need for fans to buy newspapers the next day, because they had already heard the various Olympic events described on the wireless in real time.

The written media got their wish and he was initially banned from entering Olympic venues and stadiums in Paris. Not to be deterred (and always a creative innovator), Mr. Dehorter had a genius solution: he hired a hot-air balloon. He flew over the *Stade de Colombes* with a microphone inside and successfully commentated on the track and field events below. As described by Balf (2024): 'Squeezing his ample body into a hot-air-balloon basket [he produced] windy, bird's-eye view commentary of the track-and-cycling events at Colombes. Now free to do as he pleased, the bow-tied Dehorter sat behind a plate-sized microphone mounted on a sturdy tripod. Dehorter would not be denied.' This anecdote, which contrasts the nascent media landscape of Paris 1924 with the

most recent Paris 2024 Games[1] (see Appendix L), is a suitable introduction to this study, which concerns the overlapping fields of sports journalism, mediatization and Olympic studies. It not only illustrates the historical development of media with regards to the Games, but also highlights the central role of journalists in shaping the event. The Olympic Games needs media and the media needs the Olympic Games. Both are shaped by the other in different ways according to their objectives.

Indeed, this anecdote represents a helpful early example of the mediatization of the Olympics. The story of Mr. Dehorter's hot-air balloon is a precursor to the concept of *defensive mediatization*, which is central to this dissertation, where organisations and individuals attempt to strategically impede the work of journalists. He may have been one of the very first journalists to be banned from covering the Olympic Games. However, as will be discussed throughout this dissertation, he would not be the last. Notably, it was not a powerful sports organisation (the International Olympic Committee) which tried to ban Mr. Dehorter from performing his duties as a broadcaster. Ironically, it was his rival colleagues working in the media. This raises another discussion point which will emerge later in this study in Chapter 4, which is the concept of *self-policing* among the media. Despite taking place a hundred years ago, this anecdote illustrates the innovative ways that dedicated sports journalists can respond to defensive mediatization. By hiring a hot-air balloon and flying over a stadium to broadcast and commentate, Mr. Dehorter showed a highly creative and effective method to combat a strategy which prevented him performing his journalistic duties. A century later, with a number of journalists banned from covering the Paris 2024 Games and controversies arising due to strict IOC media guidelines, there are echoes of his story still present today.

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[1] There were 24,171 media representatives at the 2024 Games, with the Olympic Broadcasting Services (OBS) producing over 11,000 hours of video content.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The aim of this opening chapter is to provide an overview for this dissertation and map out the foundations of the study. It introduces the key concepts within the context of its theoretical framework of mediatization, details the study's methodology and establishes its aims and research questions. This chapter outlines the significance of this study to the field of sports communication research, provides a brief overview of the existing literature, justification for the study and an outline of its unique contribution. This study provides a detailed examination of the relationship between sports journalists and the International Olympic Committee (IOC). It uses the theoretical lens of mediatization to scrutinise how their relationship has evolved over time. By taking this approach, the study provides empirical evidence of how mediatization is, as Hjarvard (2008a) states, 'a double-sided process of high modernity' (109), but also a two-way process of accommodation. From a once symbiotic, mutually-beneficial dynamic (Sherwood et al. 2016), the relationship between journalists and the IOC has now become, according to interviewees in this study, characterised by distrust and scepticism.

By investigating how today's reporters cover the Olympics and the IOC, using 50 in-depth qualitative interviews with experienced journalists, IOC officials and Olympic experts, this study provides unique insights into the role of the modern sports journalist. It details the working routines, motivations, difficulties and aspirations of those whose job it is to cover the Olympics. Today's sports journalists face a number of difficulties in what McEnnis (2016) describes as 'fundamental, existential concerns' (2). These concerns include a lack of secure employment opportunities, lower pay, less access and an increased workload. All of these factors have culminated to make sports journalism a more 'precarious' (Daum and Scherer 2018, 556) profession with an uncertain future (Gentile et al. 2022; Rojas-Torrijos and Nölleke 2023). By inspecting the relationship between Olympic journalists and the powerful organisation which stages the world's largest international sporting event (Boykoff 2022), this study details the challenges which today's sports journalists face performing watchdog journalism and simultaneously covering sporting matters. It also provides insights into how modern sports

organisations such as the IOC develop and implement their communications strategies and perform media relations.

This study builds on a body of recent literature (Suggs 2016; Frandsen 2016; English 2022) which examines how the changing relationship between journalists and sports organisations has resulted in a 'paradigm shift' (Sherwood et al. 2016, 439). Empowered with the ability to produce their own in-house digital content which means they can bypass traditional media (Nölleke et al. 2017), sports organisations have taken on the responsibility of delivering content directly to fans through their own websites and social media platforms, thus directly competing with traditional independent media (Suggs 2016). Added to this, today's sports organisations can increasingly dictate the conditions in which sports journalists operate (Weedon et al. 2018; McEnnis 2021). They can decide the levels of access granted, which journalists are allowed to interview athletes and can even decide which topics are discussed and what questions are allowed to be asked (Borges 2019). Organisations such as the IOC can impose time limits, media embargos, and deny press credentials depending on how beneficial a journalist's work is for them. Worryingly for the profession of sports journalism, this study provides evidence that sports organisations are also increasingly hiring their own in-house journalists in what this study refers to as the *poacher-turned-gamekeeper* trend, which has been previously highlighted in political journalism studies (Fisher 2014, 2016; Viererbl and Koch 2019). Similarly, this study uniquely draws attention to the emergence of new online content creators and social media influencers as a threat to sports journalists. Findings demonstrate how these actors have blurred the boundaries over what constitutes sports journalism (Negreira-Rey et al. 2022; McEnnis 2023), thereby co-opting journalistic roles and spaces.

This study outlines the different ways journalists and sports organisations do still proactively accommodate one another where both parties gain from mutual interaction. This co-operative and agreeable dynamic is how many older, veteran Olympic journalists interviewed for this study remember their dealings with the IOC. The IOC gains positive publicity about the Olympics from journalists, and likewise journalists get stories by covering the Games. This is what Suggs (2016) defines as an 'exchange relationship' where 'organisations allow access to coaches, athletes and events to provide valuable content, while the media provide free publicity to the organisation'

(262). However, my study also maps out restrictive tactics which the IOC employs across the macro (social structures), meso (institutions), and micro (individual actors) levels to inhibit journalists. In this study, these tactics are conceptualised as defensive mediatization. According to Nölleke et al. (2021) defensive mediatization represents 'strategies to avoid media publicity' (737) and methods to 'manage public attention in a way that maximizes benefits and minimizes disadvantages' (740). Building on Nölleke et al.'s (2021) framework for defensive mediatization which notes the three categories of *persistence, shielding* and *immunization* (See Table 1 below), my study provides further empirical evidence of these existing categories. Findings demonstrate how defensive mediatization strategies are explicit tactics which the IOC imposes on journalists to keep media spotlight away and reduce public attention.

Defensive mediatization strategy	Definition
Persistence	Social systems maintaining or strengthening established programs and norms, even though adaptations toward media logic promise advantages.
Shielding	Decisions which are made to proactively protect against media demands. Structural adaptations that are implemented even though they contradict the logic of the media and public attention.
Immunization	Strategies which are implemented to prevent dysfunctional consequences that might result from an increasing consideration of media demands.

Table 1: Nölleke et al.'s (2021) existing framework for defensive mediatization was adopted.

This study proposes a new fourth category of defensive mediatization, labelled *'steering'*. *Steering* occurs when sports organisations employ manoeuvres that guide journalists towards desirable ends. Examples of *steering* discussed in depth throughout Chapter 5 include leaking information to favourable Olympic journalists, the IOC using Zoom instead of in-person media events and the issuing of carefully crafted 'media packs' which are designed to be regurgitated by reporters. This study enhances our understanding of mediatization by showing sports organisations are not entirely resistant to external media but in fact apply *both* offensive and defensive mediatization

tactics in tandem. O'Boyle and Gallagher (2023) argue this 'highlights that mediatization is never a simple one-way process of accommodation and typically entails a mix of strategies' (666). This study uniquely contributes to the theoretical development of defensive mediatization in proposing and empirically illuminating this unique new fourth category. Although *steering* contains similarities to both *shielding* and *immunization*, it is unique because it explicitly categorises tactics used by an organisation to guide journalists towards its desired objectives in a strategic and intentional way.

These findings demonstrate Suggs' (2016) view that sports organisations are now intentionally 'deprioritizing media needs' (262) to a greater degree than before. Despite employing restrictive tactics to impede journalists and reduce publicity, this study shows that the IOC still sees benefits for working with traditional media, but a pecking order exists. Therefore, traditionally offensive strategies which accommodate and welcome the media still persist (Elmelund-Præstekær et al. 2011; Peleg and Bogoch 2012; Marcinkowski et al. 2014). This study argues, however, that relations between journalists and the IOC have deteriorated due to the application of increasingly restrictive defensive mediatization tactics. Viewing journalists as a threat to their power and image, the IOC has leaned towards a more risk-averse and conservative approach in their dealings with external media. Evaluating the benefits and potential risks of accommodating traditional journalists, the IOC sees fewer advantages to be gained than before. Therefore, these preferred defensive strategies are designed and implemented in order to inhibit journalists, reduce potential negative coverage, and uphold the IOC's reputation and self-image.

This study adds further weight to Ličen et al.'s (2022) assertion that the nature of the relationship between sport organisations and journalists has shifted 'from being a partnership to an almost adversarial relationship' (804). Throughout this dissertation, the motivations for applying defensive mediatization by the IOC and the consequences of these restrictive tactics are discussed. In the discussion chapter (Chapter 5), I assess the impact of defensive mediatization on sports journalists' ability to hold the IOC accountable and potential ways journalists can respond to strategies designed to block their work. By examining the two parties' relationship under this theoretical lens, this study reveals insights into the reality of working as a journalist covering the Olympic Games and adds a unique contribution to our understanding of modern-day sports

journalism. Likewise, this study discusses these issues from the perspective of the IOC, thus revealing insights into how and why modern sports organisations develop and implement their increasingly restrictive communications strategies. This two-sided approach presents a complex portrait of modern-day media relations between sports journalists and the organisations they cover, thereby offering a greater understanding about the future of Olympic media coverage. As sports journalists grapple with a series of challenges and their profession confronts existential difficulties (McEnnis 2021; Gentile et al. 2022), it is necessary to establish an awareness and understanding of these problems so that the profession can continue to perform its duties in the future. Similarly, it is only by distinguishing between offensive and defensive mediatization that we can understand how these media strategies are proactively created.

1.2 Existing literature and research gaps

This study is located at the intersection of research in three main areas: sports communication, mediatization and Olympic studies. This study addresses ongoing debates and research gaps in these fields with regards to the professional identity of sports journalists (Boyle 2006; English 2012; Hutchins and Rowe 2012; Sherwood and Nicholson 2013; Hutchins and Boyle 2016; Daum and Scherer 2018). It contributes new evidence towards our understanding of mediatization by using it as a theoretical lens on a highly influential but underexplored sports organisation. I address these research gaps by adopting an institutionalist approach to mediatization to examine the IOC and provide a greater understanding of what it means to work as an Olympic journalist. An institutionalist approach concerns the transformation of social and cultural institutions (eg: politics, religion, sport) by examining how they make structural adaptations to their practices due to the influence of media (Hjarvard 2008a, 2013). Media gains power and becomes an integrated pillar of institutions such as politics, religion and sport, while remaining its own separate, powerful, independent institution (Strömbäck 2013). Mediatization is a long-term process and occurs in the confines of these existing institutional frameworks (Ihlen 2014). The institutionalist tradition is therefore tasked with examining how the influence of embedded media processes change these frameworks over a period of time. Adopting an institutionalist perspective is particularly suitable to journalism due to its unique development as a powerful mass media institution throughout the 20th century (Strömbäck 2008; Bolin 2016).

In recent decades there has been a growing appreciation in academia for a greater understanding of how sport and media overlap and interact. Scholars have dissected the working routines and practices of sports journalists in significant depth (Andrews 2005; Boyle 2006; Steen et al. 2021; Domeneghetti 2021). In the past, many newsroom practitioners and academics dismissively viewed sports journalism as the 'toy department' (Rowe 2007, 384; McEnnis 2020). Critics of sports journalism's perceived lower standards have labelled reporters as 'fans with typewriters' (Boyle 2006, 181). Now, however, there is a credible body of literature that analyses the role of sports journalists, the impact of their work and the meaningfulness of their journalism given sport's prominence as a cultural product in society (Farrington et al. 2012; Weedon et al. 2018). However, McEnnis (2021) highlights a reduction in access, increased workload, lower pay and fewer career opportunities for sports journalists today than in previous decades. More starkly, Rojas-Torrijos and Nölleke (2023) posit that the definition of what journalism is 'has become increasingly messy and a crucial question arises: What is sports journalism?' (853). Therefore, this study adds to a collective body of research which considers what the future of sports journalism may look like.

I focus attention on Olympic journalists in order to closely inspect the challenges which they face in their work covering one of the most-watched global sporting events (the 2020 Tokyo Olympics had a global audience of 3 billion[2]). One of the key challenges this study addresses is determining how Olympic journalists can uphold (and not compromise) their professionalism while maintaining close access to their sources within the IOC. As Anderson (2001) notes about this dilemma: 'sports journalists who [want] to gain and maintain professional credibility [have] to do so while sustaining a close relationship with the source of information' (364). This dissertation addresses a pertinent issue concerning the credibility of sports journalists who must maintain close proximity to sources to ensure access. Sherwood et al. (2016) notes there is a significant research gap in exploring whether sports organisations are 'deliberately aiming to cut off traditional media' (514) and become their own content creators. This question, and the established literature on this topic, are what this study seeks to build upon.

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[2] Source: *'Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 watched by more than 3 billion people'*. Olympics.com. Available: https://olympics.com/ioc/news/olympic-games-tokyo-2020-watched-by-more-than-3-billion-people

While there has been a small supply of studies into the work of Olympic journalists (Kristiansen and Hanstad 2012; Flindall and Wassong 2017; Robertson 2024), there is still a significant knowledge gap in this area. As Geurin and Naraine (2020) note: 'The IOC's relationship with journalists are largely missing from the current literature' (10). There has been no shortage of recent academic work which examines the Olympics as a media event (Billings 2008; Hutchins and Mikosza 2010; Liu 2016; Yang et al. 2023). However, academic research which examines Olympic journalists is much more limited, in addition to studies which examine the IOC as an organisation. Previous work focused on the IOC has mostly taken a straightforward historical perspective documenting the organisation's development since its foundation in 1894 (Barney et al. 2002; Miller 2012; Miller 2022). There has been a recent body of research (Boyle and Hayes 2014; Nicholson et al. 2015; Suggs 2016; Sherwood et al. 2017) which examines the ever-increasing media functions of sports organisations, but few which focus specifically on the IOC and its interactions with journalists (Xu and Billings 2021).

Suggs (2016) correctly describes the interplay between journalists and sports organisations as an exchange relationship but points out that few academic studies have explained why sports organisations should still tolerate the presence of journalists: 'the literature does not operationalize conditions of this exchange relationship: What is the sports organisation actually getting for allowing reporters access to games and athletes?' (264). Similarly, although mediatization has attracted the attention of an increasing number of scholars in the sport-media nexus (Ličen et al. 2022, 795), research which intently examines mediatization in relation to sports organisations is still lacking. In recent years, Frandsen (2020) has called for additional studies which use mediatization as a lens to better understand the dynamics of sports organisations. My study seeks to answer this call. It approaches this topic by adopting Nölleke et al.'s (2021) existing framework for defensive mediatization which focuses on tactics used by organisations to obstruct journalists and reduce publicity. By addressing these numerous research gaps, my study adds further knowledge to our understanding of modern sports journalism, examines the communications strategies of sports organisations, and analyses the validity of mediatization as a theoretical construct from an institutionalist perspective.

1.3 Study's objectives

This study is guided by a number of research aims and objectives. Together, they combine to seek a deeper understanding of what it means to work as a professional Olympic sports journalist today and to gain deeper insights into the implications and consequences of defensive mediatization by sports organisations. As such, the research questions of this study are:

Central Research Question: How have Olympic journalists' professional identities and working conditions evolved in response to the IOC's communications strategies over time?

Sub-research questions:

- How do Olympic journalists define their professional identity and how has this changed over time?
- What defensive mediatization strategies has the IOC employed in its interactions with journalists?
- What motivates the IOC to implement these strategies and have these motivations shifted?
- What impact have these mediatization strategies had on the professional practices and autonomy of Olympic journalists?

These research questions are guided by Hjarvard's (2008) definition of mediatization as 'a double-sided process' (109) which is symbiotic and mutually-beneficial. This shifting process of accommodation and disruption can be better understood by closely inspecting the specific strategies of offensive and defensive mediatization. These strategies set the terms and conditions of their relationship. They create the working environment in which Olympic journalists operate and impose the boundaries and limits in which these journalists can work. By granting media credentials, setting up press conferences and organising mixed zones[3] at the Olympic Games, the IOC actively encourages journalists to produce content about their events. These are examples of

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[3] Mixed-zones are areas at sporting venues where athletes stop to speak with journalists after a game or event has taken place. Typically at a mixed-zone, a group of journalists will huddle around an athlete, coach or official to ask them questions. Mixed-zones are a convenient way for sports journalists to obtain quotes for their stories. They represent one of the few opportunities sports journalists have to speak face-to-face with athletes and officials. Normally a communications officer or public relations official will oversee the mixed zone, accompanying the athlete while they answer reporters' questions.

offensive mediatization. They draw journalists in, creating a comfortable working environment in the hope of producing positive media coverage. However, the IOC also dissuades journalists by enforcing defensive strategies, which will be discussed in depth throughout Chapter 5. These include banning journalists from attending Olympic events, refusing interview requests and imposing time limits on who can be interviewed and how many questions can be asked.

These examples illustrate how sports organisations can dictate the conditions in which journalists function and show mediatization at play across the macro, meso and micro levels (See Table 2 below). They also show the importance of specifically categorising these strategies across different institutional levels. This study's research questions respond to Robertson's (2024) call for further research that 'explores Olympic journalism by paying attention to its producers' (94). This study's research questions also respond to Rojas-Torrijos and Nölleke's (2023) recent assertion that sports journalism has 'lost its status as the undisputed playmaker in delivering sports-related information to audiences' (853). Sports media scholars have aptly noted the myriad of challenges which currently face sports journalists. Frandsen (2016) notes that 'a new wave of mediatization is taking place in sports [and] many organisations struggle with this and currently find themselves in a state of flux' (385). This study provides new empirical evidence on this new wave of mediatization. By addressing these gaps, my study illustrates how the IOC and journalists are simultaneously embedded and interdependent (Hjarvard 2013, 8).

Institutional level	Definition
Macro level *(social structures)*	• Programs • Informal and formal norms
Meso level *(organisations and institutions)*	• Resources • Hierarchies • Regulations
Micro level *(individual actors)*	• Professional roles • Individual behavior

Table 2: The three institutional levels (from Nölleke et al. 2021)

This study has specific limitations which are important to highlight at the beginning of this dissertation. Firstly, this study limits itself to examining the IOC and sports journalists. Other stakeholders including Olympic athletes, sponsors and fans were all considered for potential qualitative interviews. There has already been extensive research on media coverage of Olympians (Kristiansen and Hanstad 2012, Kovacs and Doczi 2019), the media consumption habits of Olympic fans (Li, et al. 2018; Devlin et al. 2018; Smith-Ditizio 2023) and the significance of sponsors in shaping the Olympics (Yazdanparast and Bayar 2020; Baim et al. 2021). Each of these groups directly impacts, or is impacted by, media coverage of the Olympics generated by sports journalists and the IOC. However, I intentionally limit this study to inspecting the dynamics solely between these two parties.

Another limitation to acknowledge is the study's theoretical approach. Historically, mediatization has faced criticism for being too broad and wide-reaching (Deacon and Strayer 2015; Ansaldo 2022). This study adopts an institutionalist approach thereby omitting schools of thought which view mediatization through a socio-constructivist or materialist lens (Hepp 2013). The socio-constructivist tradition in mediatization concerns the influence of social processes, focusing more intently on how our social reality is generated and constructed by media technologies such as television and social media (Couldry and Hepp 2013). A materialist approach places an emphasis on how the materiality of specific media technologies is central to how they can affect change on cultural and societal domains (Hjarvard 2008a, 2013). Due to the structure of the IOC as a significant global international organisation and journalism's role as a powerful mass media institution, adopting an institutionalist approach was the most suitable for the specific research objectives of this study. Finally, an important limitation to highlight is focusing solely on Olympic journalists. This study's results do not claim to be representative of all sports journalists, every IOC employee, or every major sports organisation. Olympic journalists offer an entry point to discuss broader themes within the field of sports journalism studies. Similarly, the IOC provides focused, specific insights which can later be compared with other sports organisations such as FIFA, World Rugby and the NFL. These limits create opportunities for future research with stakeholders such as Olympic athletes, sponsors and fans. Avenues for future research on the identity of Olympic journalists and about defensive mediatization are discussed in the final chapter of this dissertation.

1.4 Motivation and unique contribution

This study was motivated by a number of contemporary issues being debated in the academic discipline of sports communication today. Sports journalists face increasing pressures due to the decline of print media, digital disruption, smaller newsroom budgets and less job security. As noted by Gentile et al. (2022): 'the future of sports journalism is unknown and frightening for those working in the industry' (1,178). This crossroads can be illustrated with the following example. In April 2024, sports writer Henry Winter announced on X (formerly Twitter) that he was being made redundant by The Times. Winter is regarded as one of the most respected and widely read newspaper journalists in the UK. To emphasise his reputation as one of the preeminent sports journalists, Winter's decision to leave The Daily Telegraph back in 2016 and initially join The Times was announced with its own television advert and commercial campaign. As noted by a newspaper report in The Guardian: 'Over his 35 years at the Independent, the Telegraph and the Times, Winter became the closest thing football journalism has ever had to a celebrity. Players know him. Managers know him. He was ubiquitous, respected, pretty much untouchable' (Liew 2024).

Winter's redundancy made headlines and his 2024 departure from The Times was greeted with shock by loyal readers and with concern by worried colleagues in the sports media industry. It was a seismic moment which starkly emphasised the difficulties facing sports journalism as a profession. If a writer with the esteemed reputation of Winter was being made redundant, it painted a bleak picture of the industry at large. It presents a useful insight into what Gentile et al. (2022) describe as 'trepidation regarding the future of the industry' (1,190). This study was motivated by moments such as this, which have become more and more common in sports media. If one of the UK's leading sports writers faces significant professional difficulties, it raises fundamental questions about the health and viability of the profession more broadly, particularly lower down the pecking order. Winter's redundancy at The Times was a high-profile example of wider trends within the sports media industry. Factors such as lower salaries, less opportunities, fewer permanent contracts and increased workload have negatively impacted sports journalists in the last decade (McEnnis 2021).

This study addresses these difficulties and investigates the role of sports organisations in creating this environment (Sherwood et al. 2016). Winter's redundancy is indicative of challenges faced by sports journalists across the world. Other high-profile examples include The New York Times disbanding its sports desk (Robertson and Koblin 2023), ESPN firing a number of its high-profile sports broadcasters in 2023 (Meyersohn and Passantino 2023) and, similarly, Sports Illustrated enforcing mass layoffs of its staff in early 2024 (Kraft 2024). Significant layoffs and cost-cutting measures at highly respected sports media publications are now a common occurrence. This study was motivated by a desire to investigate the causes of these trends. Sports journalism is a profession undergoing 'editorial and ethical challenges in a fast-changing media environment' (Bradshaw and Minogue 2019). It is timely and necessary to understand the reality of producing Olympic sports journalism to assess its future viability.

Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube and most recently TikTok have significantly empowered sports organisations, who now produce in-house content and circumvent traditional media (Grimmer and Kian 2013; Mirer et al. 2018; Mirer 2019a; Harry and Hammit 2024). This means sports journalists are more dispensable to them. Innovative new opportunities to bypass the media have threatened the legitimacy of journalists (Suggs 2016). By examining the dynamics between Olympic journalists and the IOC, this study provides unique new insights into this power balance shift. Ličen et al. (2022) claim that having been 'accused of cheerleading and being too frivolous' sports journalists now have 'little choice but to employ a more critical stance to remain relevant' (803-804). My study counters this view, showing that many Olympic journalists employ a *less* critical stance, in order to ingratiate themselves to the sports organisation as a means of self-preservation. This asserts Cook's (1998) label of 'accommodation with strings attached' (44), whereby journalists passively and uncritically reproduce what powerful figures say to preserve media access. This adds to previous findings that highlight how a cohort of veteran Olympic journalists provide flattering coverage of the IOC (Jennings 2011). My study provides new evidence that some sports journalists are indeed guilty of 'overselling the virtues of the Olympics' (Robertson 2024, 91) because their journalistic identity is dependent on it.

This study uniquely distinguishes how the IOC employs both offensive and defensive mediatization strategies together and that these adaptations are complementary and overlapping. Interviewees said the reputation of publications such as the BBC, the New York Times and CNN is still of immense value to the IOC. The motivation for offensive mediatization by sports organisations remains to 'institutionalize contacts with journalists' (Cronk 1986, 198) and build a bridge to the news world. Indeed, existing research has focused on the proactive ways to gain media attention. Nölleke et al. (2021) state that research on mediatization has predominantly emphasised efforts to offensively influence media coverage and 'shape it in favourable ways' (743). While the IOC still sees many benefits for engaging with journalists, this study uniquely highlights a conscious and deliberate move towards a more conservative and sceptical view of their work.

Some interviewees said they feel under pressure to maintain what little access they still have by adopting an approach which keeps them in favour with the IOC. As such, this study emphasises a significant concern among Olympic journalists, which is how to adequately respond to defensive mediatization strategies. Faced with a reduction in access, less time for interviews, more remote reporting and threats of defamation letters, many sports journalists struggled to offer solutions. This evidence addresses the viability of producing high-quality sports journalism in increasingly difficult working environments. This study therefore offers a new contribution to these contemporary discussions about sports journalists by highlighting the power and effectiveness of defensive mediatization tactics by the IOC. This study is particularly unique given the lack of substantial Olympic research which has adopted a qualitative, interview-based approach, as well as the significant absence of research speaking directly with employees of the IOC. This study presents a unique insight into the inner-workings, mentality and motivations of a closely-guarded organisation which is at the forefront of global sport.

1.5 Defensive mediatization as a theoretical framework

This study is framed around the theoretical concept of defensive mediatization. It is beneficial at the beginning of this dissertation to briefly reflect on why this concept has been chosen and how it best captures the scope of the work presented. Defensive mediatization is the term used to

describe the methods by which powerful institutions resist adaptations towards the media's needs (Nölleke et al. 2021). It is a framework which is used in this study to conceptualise the strategies and tactics used by individuals and organisations to impede journalists and reduce media coverage. Other factors and influences beyond defensive mediatization have altered the relationship between the IOC and journalists, including commercialization of the Olympic brand, more demanding public expectations of sports organisations and the wider fragmentation of journalistic norms.

Following initial pilot interviews in this study, defensive mediatization emerged as a highly suitable, timely and accurate theoretical framework which best characterizes interactions between Olympic journalists and the IOC. As will be discussed in later chapters, over time the IOC has strategically applied increasingly hostile and restrictive media relations towards journalists. These decisions were made on the basis of protecting and upholding the IOC's reputation as a global sports organisation, viewing journalists and their watchdog role with increasing suspicion and distrust. As such, through the process of conducting interviews for this study, defensive mediatization offered a precise conceptual model onto which interactions between the IOC and journalists could be mapped across the macro, meso and micro institutional levels. Doing so offered a more accurate and robust prism through which this study could present, analyse and probe the relationship between both parties in a more detailed and explicit structure. Historically, a large proportion of mediatization research has focussed on offensive adaptations, whereby organisations court media attention and alter their internal structures to comply with media demands (Kunelius and Reunanen 2016).

In this respect, embarking on a study which flips this perspective and adds new empirical evidence towards defensive adaptations helps alleviate an existing gap in mediatization literature. Despite its limitations, which will be discussed later in this dissertation, defensive mediatization is a highly suitable framework to examine the IOC specifically because it is an elitist, bureaucratic organisation which operates from a position of entrenched authority and economic power (Boykoff 2022). The IOC buffers itself and its own sense of prestige by resisting adaptations to media members which it views as a potential threat. This study will discuss how the IOC recognises that the consequences which ignoring the media has for others does not always apply to them due to its insular nature, wealth, tradition and political influence (Goldblatt 2018). These factors and the

unique characteristics of the IOC's exceptionalism and self-created mythology make the novel deployment of a new and emerging concept such as defensive mediatization a highly ambitious and worthwhile exploration.

1.6 Structural outline of dissertation

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. After this introduction chapter, it continues into an in-depth review of the existing literature. Chapter 2 comprises three sections which critically evaluate the key areas of research which informs this study. Firstly, an overview of the present state of knowledge with regards to sports communication. This addresses ongoing scholarly debates surrounding the identity, professional ideology (McEnnis 2016, 2020, 2021) and working practices of today's sports journalists inside and outside the Games (Boyle 2006; Hutchins and Rowe 2012; English 2012; Sherwood and Nicholson 2013; Hutchins and Boyle 2016; Daum and Scherer 2018). Next, the literature review addresses existing research in the area of Olympic studies. This section of Chapter 2 provides important contextual information regarding the IOC, the Olympic Movement, the Olympic Charter and IOC media guidelines at the Games. Finally, the third section of the literature review chapter critically evaluates previous research in the field of mediatization. I provide a discussion about the evolution of mediatization theory, how sport is undergoing a new wave of mediatization (Frandsen 2020), and the important new consideration of defensive mediatization in recent years. This final section also discusses critiques of this innovative theoretical framework and the mediatization of the Olympic Games.

Chapter 3 provides an extensive outline and explanation for the methodological approach taken in this study. It offers a justification for its qualitative design and use of in-depth interviews. I describe my method of analysis through use of NVivo software while utilising Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Here I will also discuss the ethical considerations taken throughout the study. Through applying Braun and Clarke's six-step process, I initially identified patterns of meaning from interview data via an inductive and deductive approach. In this sense, early interviews helped establish initial themes, some of which were later disregarded, with defensive mediatization emerging as the defining aspect which best characterised the IOC's relationship with journalists. This methodology chapter details how this study was carefully

designed in comparison with others which have examined sports organisations and similar studies which have interviewed journalists as its method for obtaining data.

The fourth section of this dissertation presents its findings. Chapter 4 lays out the four key themes which emerged from its 50 in-depth interviews. These themes are: Olympic sports journalists' professional ideology; mediatization strategies; the IOC's motivations for engaging with journalists; the adversarial and symbiotic relationship between the IOC and sports journalists. These four themes combine to provide the first level of analysis. Using first-hand accounts of sports journalists and IOC officials, I use their words to illustrate the dynamics which their interactions are built upon. This helps create a nuanced, diachronic depiction of the two parties' relationship, which is the basis for the next chapter of this dissertation.

Chapter 5 is the discussion and analysis section of this study. Having provided a descriptive outline of my findings, Chapter 5 provides the second level of analysis, focusing more intently on synthesising the study's central concept of defensive mediatization into a synchronic portrait of present-day practices. This is achieved by categorising and analysing explicit examples of defensive mediatization (persistence, shielding, immunization) at the IOC across the macro, meso and micro institutional levels. This chapter also proposes this study's new fourth category of defensive mediatization, which is labelled *steering*. The chapter opens by briefly discussing *offensive* mediatization in order to differentiate between offensive and defensive strategies. I contend, however, that the IOC intentionally 'reduce the autonomy enjoyed by reporters' (Suggs 2016, 262) as a result of its increasing deployment of defensive measures. A conservative, sceptical attitude towards journalists encompasses the state of their relationship at present. Chapter 5 illustrates that the application of defensive mediatization provides a framework for understanding why the IOC and sports journalists have grown apart and why a sense of fear governs their interactions today. At the end of the chapter, a discussion is provided acknowledging wider influences beyond the scope of the defensive mediatization model deployed.

Chapter 6 provides a final overview of the study, revisiting its primary objectives and evaluating the extent to which it successfully addressed each of the central research questions. This conclusion chapter discusses the limitations of the study, focusing on its lack of gender balance (Dam 2022;

Santana et al. 2022; Boczek et al. 2023) and the limits of taking an institutionalist approach to mediatization research. I also discuss the practical and theoretical implications of the study, including suggestions for practitioners working in newsrooms and other major sports organisations. Lastly, the concluding chapter highlights the study's key takeaways for scholars, and avenues for future research in the areas of sports communication, journalism and mediatization, particularly in relation to examining the validity of defensive mediatization in other fields of journalism beyond sport.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The following chapter provides a critical analysis of the literature which this dissertation is built upon. After a discussion of the history of journalist-source relations and sports journalism as a unique discipline, the chapter is divided into three sections which encompass the key areas which overlap in this study. These are: sports communication, Olympic studies, and mediatization. The chapter offers a critical review of the extant literature, outlines the key theoretical concepts which form the framework of this study, as well as important contextual information pertaining to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Olympic Movement. In the first section, I begin by outlining the development of sports communication as a distinct field of study. I discuss how sports communication has been established as a valid and distinct discipline since the 1980s and how this dissertation is located within this field. I discuss sports journalism as a subsection of sports communication. I also critically evaluate the body of research which has examined the media functions of sports organisations. I finish this opening section by exploring research pertaining specifically to Olympic sports journalism, which encompasses a significant gap in the existing research. Throughout this opening section of the literature review, I address contemporary debates in sports journalism in relation to access, gatekeeping, identity and the profession's future viability.

In the second section of this chapter, I turn my focus towards Olympic studies in order to illustrate how this study makes a unique contribution to our understanding of the Games. I discuss the existing body of work which examines the Olympic Games as an event through a media lens, again noting the absence of studies which focus on Olympic journalists and on the IOC's communications. This section provides an explanation of the Olympic Movement, while also discussing the role of the Olympic Charter and the IOC's media guidelines for journalists. This provides essential contextual information about the Olympic Movement and the inner workings of the IOC, which is necessary before I can begin to analyse its complex dynamic with sports journalists. As will be discussed later in this chapter, an extensive body of literature exists on the

Games, however there is a notable dearth of research which examines the IOC's interactions with journalists and the implications and consequences of their relationship.

Building on these discussions about sports communication and Olympic studies, the third and final section of this chapter focuses on the existing literature in the field of mediatization. I begin by defining what mediatization is, outlining relevant criticisms of mediatization as a theoretical framework and justify my decision to adopt an institutionalist approach (Hjarvard 2013; Strömbäck 2013) compared to other schools of thought, for example the socio-constructivist tradition (Hepp 2013). After this, I critically evaluate studies of the mediatization of journalism and the Olympic Games. This carries into a more focused discussion about sports mediatization research and its increasing use as a theoretical construct by sports media scholars in recent years (Frandsen 2020). This section finishes with a focussed examination of the concept of defensive mediatization. I discuss recent studies which have utilised defensive mediatization as a conceptual framework, as I aim to contribute new empirical evidence towards an expanded understanding of this emerging concept. This study seeks to achieve this by examining the impact and effectiveness of defensive mediatization on journalists and rigorously exploring the underlying motivations that drive the IOC to implement these strategies.

2.2 Journalist-source relations and sports journalism as a unique discipline

Before moving into an in-depth discussion of the three primary areas of literature that inform this study, which are sports communication, Olympic studies and mediatization, it is constructive to open this chapter by focusing intently on two topics which provide important context for these later discussions. These topics are journalist-source relations and sports journalism as a unique discipline. This study focuses on the ways in which Olympic journalists navigate their relationship with the IOC, however there is a much wider catalogue of literature which has documented how journalists more broadly cultivate and manage interactions with their sources in areas outside of sport. It is necessary to incorporate discussions about this area of research in order to distinguish how this study fits into a wider narrative about journalists and from whom they obtain their information. Similarly, it is pertinent to distinguish the ways in which sports journalism is part of a wider journalistic literature and to discuss its unique characteristics.

The study of journalists and their sources is divided into different schools of thought which view their interactions according to alternative power dynamics (Carlson 2009). These can be summarised firstly as a symbiotic and mutually beneficial relationship (Gans 1979), secondly, by source dominance in defining cultural narratives (Hall et al. 1978) and thirdly as constant competition for access and framing power (Schlesinger 1990; Ericson et al. 1989). Scholars debate the extent to which journalists are autonomous in the selection of their sources, or whether powerful sources dictate the terms of their engagement. As a profession, journalism is understood according to the principle of objectivity, which emphasises the impartiality of unbiased news gatherers. However, this principle of objectivity comes under intense scrutiny in the process of information gathering (Schiller 1981).

Journalists' conscious decisions over who is deemed 'worthy' (Carlson 2009, 531) of being a source of information, and the impact of ignoring outsiders and marginalised members of society as sources has considerable implications for how stories are produced. Likewise, the power and autonomy of journalists not only in the information-gathering stage of news production, but in the framing and presentation of that information, is significant in the context of their sources. Entman (1993) suggests that how news is gathered and presented raises fundamental questions in terms of which person's version of events is provided to the public, what information is prioritised, which voice is strongest and what stories are omitted and deemed unworthy and irrelevant. With all of these factors and choices at play, the argument that journalists are passive, objective interpreters of information is questioned and undermined (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2021).

Journalists use sources in order to provide factual evidence for their stories. Using credible sources, who can outline detailed, first-hand accounts of events lends journalists' stories legitimacy and authenticity (Carson 2009). This careful process underscores the idealised objective nature of the journalist as a gatherer, interpreter and verifier of information, rather than depending entirely on their own observations and opinions in isolation. On the one hand, this process relieves journalists of complete responsibility for information that is reported, because they are merely relaying information as a messenger (Ericson 1998). However, this viewpoint also emphasises the choices which journalists make in the selection of their sources. Journalists confer authority and

authenticity by choosing particular sources. Manning (2000) argues that journalists often reinforce existing social structures by privileging certain voices while marginalising others. Added to this, journalists also have choices in how they interpret, verify and present information which is given to them. How trustworthy a source is and the motivations behind why they provide, or conceal, information must all be taken into consideration by journalists. The necessity to gather multiple sources of information underscores this careful process of verification. The tendency for sources to inject bias into their version of events must be actively recognised and countered by journalists if they are to avoid simplifying the pursuit of objectivity into a 'strategic ritual', as noted by Tuchman (1972, 660). This can be achieved by the careful and deliberate process of obtaining multiple perspectives on the same story.

A core feature of the journalist-source relationship is its 'symbiotic' (Strömbäck and Nord 2006, 147) nature. This means that both parties benefit from mutual engagement. Journalists obtain information which helps them to produce stories, meanwhile sources benefit by having their stories heard by large audiences. Therefore they can influence key decision makers by providing their version of events (Reich 2006). Scholars warn that journalists must be careful of the pitfalls of this symbiotic relationship (Lubens 2015). Over-reliance on the same sources, and a failure to question sources' motives, shifts the power balance away from journalists and risks reinforcing existing social structures which privilege the already elite and powerful. Journalists have the power to confer authority onto a source by using them for their stories, which creates a cycle of reinforcing power to those who already possess it. Schudson (2003) describes this process as 'news making as a reality-constructing activity governed by elites'.

Experts, when called upon to provide their opinion on an issue, maintain their title of expertise by repeatedly being quoted in the media as an expert. Frequent media appearances, regardless of the validity or quality of statements, amplifies their status as news shapers. This is aptly summarised by Carlson (2009) who states: 'Who the experts are is reinforced through continued coverage in the news, which creates a cycle that heightens access for some sources while eliminating other voices not considered authoritative or relevant' (531). Similarly, another risk inherent in the relationship between journalists and their sources is the power placed on attribution. Journalists can omit themselves of complete responsibility by arguing that they are merely quoting what their

sources tell them. Journalism of attribution moves the burden of proof away from journalists and onto their sources (Tuchman 1978; Ericson 1998). Blindsided belief in the viewpoints of sources risks journalists overlooking the power and responsibility they still possess in the verification process given to them (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2021) and the importance of fact-checking instead of mere regurgitation. Information provided by sources cannot be accepted as fact without going through the thorough verification process which is a bedrock of journalism's credibility. Otherwise, an overreliance on journalism of attribution 'frees the journalist from the extra labor of adjudicating claims' (Carlson 2009, 528).

A criticism has been levelled at journalists for an over-dependence on official sources, such as government officials and institutional representatives (Sigal 1973; Brown et al. 1987; Hallin et al. 1993). This routine of news gathering not only contributes towards reinforcing hegemonic power structures, but simultaneously curtails the diversity of voices in news stories by ignoring marginalised members of society who exist outside the elite, wealthy and connected circles of influence (Hall et al. 1978). This argument put forward by Stuart Hall suggests a fundamental flaw, which is that journalism exists to hold the powerful to account, but fails to do so by this overreliance on elites as sources. When journalists come from the same backgrounds as the officials they aim to hold accountable, and exist in the same spheres of influence and social circles, then their method of source gathering (over relying on official channels) becomes questionable if the intended goal is to act as the fourth estate and watchdog of society. As argued by Carlson (2009): 'It is a cyclical move in which elites derive authority from their position as elites, use this status to speak, and then have this position reinforced through the reproduction of their having spoken' (532).

The existing literature on journalist-source relations therefore posits three key perspectives: mutual legitimation, primary definers, and competitive definers. Conceptual differences are significant, taking into account 'source agency, historical and institutional shifts, symbolic and pragmatic dimensions, internal and external focuses, and the relationship between news sources and cultural power' (Carlson 2009, 530). Mutual legitimation emphasises the mutual benefit obtained from both journalists and sources via mutual engagement. The primary definers perspective highlights that, while journalists report the news, it is the process of conveying meaning and significance

onto that news where real power exists. Journalists often inadvertently enact news values that promote the hegemony of the ruling classes. 'Because journalists rely on attribution, they end up systematically over-accessing those in power. Journalists reproduce the interests of the powerful [and] ruling ideologies are presented as natural and accepted.' (2009, 533). Finally, the competitive definers perspective concerns the framing of news. Journalists do not have to passively accept what sources tell them as fact and possess the ability to frame information through their own autonomous decision-making and news judgement. This perspective emphasises how competitive sources contest against each other for the attention and validation of journalists. When this attention is not granted powerful individuals and organisations seek alternative forms of external influence, namely in the shape of public relations (Franklin et al. 2009).

In recent decades a growing number of scholars have argued that labelling sports journalism as lacking the ethical rigour and professional standards of other areas of news is unfair and inaccurate (Andrews 2005; Hardin et al. 2009; English 2017). Many suggest that sports journalism should be considered on an equal footing with other spheres of journalism because it adheres to the same guiding principles which are the bedrock of the profession (Boyle 2006; Weedon et al. 2018). While this viewpoint is necessary to acknowledge, it is also important to position how sports journalism does fit into this wider journalistic landscape. In doing so, using the existing literature as a guide, we can identify the common traits which sports journalism does share with other areas of news coverage. It also provides a useful framework to outline and explain the unique characteristics which make sports journalism separate from other news topics. Discussing these individual traits which make sports journalism stand apart does not intend to add further weight to its historic criticisms. Rather, it allows a more nuanced and contextualised understanding of how sports journalism developed, the challenges it faces and the unique set of circumstances which make it a distinctive sub-section of a wider journalistic landscape in which it plays an increasingly respected part (Steen et al. 2021).

Sports journalism falls under the umbrella of journalism because it adheres to the same values and objectives which define the profession regardless of what subject is being covered (Wilson and Yoon 2024). Objectivity, impartiality, an obligation to reporting the truth, thorough verification of information, balance, independence, holding power to account. These are all principles which are

to be found in sports journalism. There are additional characteristics which are more pronounced when journalists cover sport than other areas of news. For example, sport is highly narrative-driven in its coverage (Wood 2025). Storytelling is a fundamental aspect of sports writing and weaving compelling narratives about athletes, their journeys, successes and failures is a key way in which sports journalists create compelling content for audiences (Winston 2015). Sport is premised on the pursuit of victory and the rewards that it generates. Equally compelling is the emotion and heartbreak that is associated with failure in sport. Conveying the highs and lows of the pursuit of victory can be found in other areas of news, such as political campaigns, but it is found more consistently and authentically within sport (Cooky and Antunovic 2018). Intense and careful storytelling, utilising metaphor and the deployment of literary devices are each key attributes of sports journalism when discussing the aspects which make it distinct (Weedon et al. 2018).

Another key characteristic which denotes sports journalism is the event-driven nature of sport itself (Schultz 2005). The Olympic Games, FIFA World Cups, Wimbledon, the Super Bowl and the Ryder Cup are scattered throughout a given calendar year, with hardly a single week passing without a major sporting event taking place across men's and women's codes. Sports coverage is dictated by the schedule of events in each sport and the regularity of these events has a significant impact on the type of coverage which is produced (Liang 2019). While political journalism can be measured according to election campaigns, for example the US Presidential election every four years, sports journalism is much more stringently wedded to events which are flagged in advance (Perreault and Nölleke 2022). Sports journalism follows a timely pattern. A Premier League football team will host a pre-game press conference, take part in a game over a weekend, hold a post-game press conference afterwards, and stage numerous media opportunities with players and officials in-between. The coverage produced by sports journalists is dictated by the staging of these media events because they allow a coveted type of 'controlled access' (Gentile et al. 2021, 1181) to players and coaches. The media spectacle is built around the sporting event, which is the main attraction around which all other coverage flows towards, builds in anticipation to, and then reacts to afterwards (Butryn et al. 2020; Peña and Bock 2025).

Critics of sports journalism point to the behaviour of journalists, their fandom and the undermining of objectivity which calls into question ideals of professionalism and credibility (Hardin et al.

2009). The tribal nature of sport and the reality that many sports journalists are fans of the sports which they cover are important factors to acknowledge. However in doing so, Boyle (2006) argues it is also necessary to observe that not all sports journalists allow their personal sense of fandom or enjoyment of sport to cloud their judgement or undermine their professional conduct as reporters. Many practitioners argue against this 'perceived proximity to fandom' (McEnnis 2017, 549) and state that they are journalists first and fans second. The long-established cliché of sports journalists simply being what English (2017) terms 'fans with laptops' (537) remains a notable characteristic of sports coverage which makes it inherently unique. Fandom exists in other spheres of journalism, but is especially pronounced in sports journalism. It has been, and remains, a topic which follows sports journalism and has shaped its professional ideology due to a constant need to re-emphasize and justify its sense of professionalism (Stamm and Whiteside 2024). Sports journalists pursue a professional occupation where there is a subtle expectation to hype the events and competitions which they cover, while at the same time not losing their ability to be critical of those events and the organisations which stage them (Andrews 2005). This requires a unique balancing act of performing an objective, dual role as cheerleader and critic simultaneously (English 2017; McEnnis 2021).

2.3 Sports communication

(i) Sports communication as a field of study

In their investigation into how sports journalism has 'lost its status' and faces an uncertain future, Rojas-Torrijos and Nölleke (2023) argue that: 'the playing field of sports communication has become more and more confusing' (853). They observe that there are a number of ongoing debates and unresolved issues in the field of sports communication, both in terms of its practitioners and for academics who try to make sense of it. The ability of sports organisations to produce their own in-house content, the blurring of boundaries between content creators and journalists, and the diminishing access available to reporters are all current concerns. Before we can begin to address these topics, we must assess how sports communication began as its own distinct field of study.

The field of sports communication has been a rapidly growing discipline in recent decades (Abeza et al. 2014). Sport has consistently been a popular area of focus for scholars from a number of academic disciplines, such as sports science, sports management, and the sociology of sport, amongst others. Writing about its significance, Boyle (2013) argues that sport matters 'because of what it tells us about aspects of society rather than specifically about the nature of sporting competition' (89). The vast and multi-disciplinary study of sport reflects its popularity as a leisurely pastime and its significance as a distinct form of entertainment and as a cultural product in the humanities. In particular, throughout the 20th century sport's global importance and visibility grew rapidly thanks to its integration with new forms of mass media (Pederson 2013). Coverage of sporting events in newspapers, on radio and television caused increased levels of interest, higher levels of participation and larger attendance at events. The promotion of sport by the media brought more financial incentives for stakeholders and the potential for sponsorship and advertising, thus further helping to move sport from an amateur pastime to a professional capacity. Naturally, the integration of sport and media witnessed a widespread upsurge in the consumption of media content specifically about sport (Wenner 1998). Newspapers created dedicated sections solely for the coverage of sport knowing it would increase sales (Moritz 2014), dedicated sports magazines were founded, while television and radio began to cover sporting events with live broadcasts.

For centuries, sport played an important societal role as a form of physical activity and community bonding. It was due to its promotion by new media technologies that its role as an entertainment and cultural product deepened. As will be discussed later in this chapter, the establishment of sports journalism as a profession and the role of journalists in the promotion of sport has been integral to its rapid growth. Boyle (2013) describes journalists as having always been 'important cultural intermediaries between sports and society' and 'the myth makers of sports' (92). Due to their reliance on one another, recent decades have witnessed communication scholars take a focused interest on the relationship between sport and media. Particularly since the 1980s, this scholarship has developed into its own distinct field. Although frequently addressed by different names and labels, for the purposes of clarity I define this field as *sports communication.* As noted by Butterworth (2021): 'The field has expanded rapidly in the past two decades, bringing together related traditions in communication studies, mass communication, journalism and cultural studies.

The field's legitimacy has been confirmed by the growth of representation in academic associations and a growing body of research' (3).

There are now a number of research centres, associations and international conferences dedicated solely to the study of sports media. Academic journals which task themselves with providing in-depth, high-quality research about the study of sport and media include *Communication and Sport*, the *International Journal of Sports Communication* and the *Journal of Sports Media*. These sources, as well as numerous recent academic textbooks by sports media scholars (Lambert 2018; Bradshaw and Minogue 2019; Duncan 2020; Washburn and Lamb 2020; Boyle 2020; Steen et al. 2021; Domeneghetti 2021), demonstrate the growth of sports communication and its place as an important and valid sub-section of communication studies more broadly (Abez et al. 2014). This dissertation is situated within this field. As noted by Clavio (2023), the rapid changes of modern technology and journalism practices place limitations on sports communication researchers. He states: 'The changing natures of social media technology and user preferences for content have often moved faster than the body of research surrounding them' (361). With this caveat in mind, my study seeks to make a unique contribution to the field of sports communication, building on the work of pioneering scholars including Andrew Billings, Gary Whannel, Kirsten Frandsen, Marie Harden, Lawrence Wenner, David Rowe, Raymond Boyle and Brett Hutchins. These, and countless others, have built the foundations for sports communication as a distinct and legitimate field of inquiry that continues to grow and pose new research questions (Billings et al. 2012). In this study, I define sports communication according to Pederson et al. (2007) who state: 'Sport communication is a process by which people in sport, in a sport setting, or through a sport endeavour, share symbols as they create meaning through interaction' (196).

(ii) Sports journalism

Within this field of sports communication, sports journalism is identified as a unique sub-section. Ongoing debates in contemporary sports journalism research include assessing the quality of sports reporting on the Olympics (Robertson 2024), examining whether journalists hold sports organisations sufficiently accountable (Sherwood et al. 2016; Weedon et al. 2018), and what the future of Olympic sports journalism may look like (Wilson and Yoon 2024). The decline of print

circulation, integration of branded content and digital convergence have all heavily impacted the profession. A number of recent studies have raised concerns about sports journalism's future (Rojas-Torrijos and Nölleke 2023; McEnnis 2020; Weedon et al. 2018). A substantial body of academic scholarship has explored sports journalism, however identifying answers and solutions to its future viability remains a critical contemporary issue (Bradshaw and Minogue 2019; Domeneghetti 2021). Diminishing access, fewer job opportunities, increased workload and the changing consumption habits of sports fans have all caused a reassessment of sports journalists and their work (Rojas-Torrijos and Nölleke 2023). Historically, sports journalism has been heavily criticised both in professional and academic circles (Hardin et al. 2009; Washburn and Lamb 2020). For many years, largely until the 1980s, journalism scholars dismissed sports journalism or did not consider the topic worthy of academic inquiry (Andrews 2005).

Despite this legacy, the study and practice of sports journalism has attained a heightened level of scholarly interest and respectability in more recent years (Boyle 2013). Sports journalism previously faced criticism by those working in media for lacking the standards, ethics and importance of other areas of news coverage (Steen et al. 2021). These sentiments were mirrored in academic circles. Until recent decades, media scholars showed little interest in studying sports journalism. As noted by Boyle (2006): '[It was] traditionally viewed disparagingly as the 'toy department'... a bastion of easily living, sloppy journalism and 'soft' news. Until recently, [it] has been largely absent from journalism education and invisible among the growing critical literature within media studies' (1). In the two decades since Raymond Boyle penned that description, the study of sports journalism has grown rapidly. Similar to the field of sports communication outlined above, there are now numerous textbooks, journal articles and specialised academics who research solely on sports journalism issues. It is noteworthy that the rising level of academic interest in sports journalism has coincided with significant professional difficulties in the industry (Kammer 2014). These issues have made the professional pursuit of sports journalism more difficult. Challenges include burnout, lower pay, job losses and strenuous deadlines owing to a 24/7 news cycle (McEnnis 2021). Writing in The Atlantic, sports writer Keith O'Brien aptly noted that at a time when there is more sports content available to stream and consume — podcasts, Netflix specials, Amazon Prime documentaries — the profession itself is struggling: 'The new sports-media reality is complex. Sports fans are awash in more content than ever before. Yet despite all

of this entertainment, true sports-accountability journalism is disappearing' (O'Brien 2024). The numerous challenges afflicting sports journalists have been reflected in the academic literature, with many recent studies seeking to provide insights into the present-day difficulties and future uncertainty of sports journalism. The challenges which currently afflict the profession have inspired a new wave of media research investigating these issues (Rojas-Torrijos and Nölleke 2023). Sports media scholars are critically examining the reasons why sports journalism is presently struggling and what the future of the profession will look like.

A number of important, fundamental research questions about the future of sports journalism remain unresolved. These include how sports journalists can perform their jobs without access, their reliance on poor quality access by sports organisations, and the consequences of defensive mediatization strategies imposed on them, as I will examine later in Chapter 5. Due to their weakened position today, sports journalists are increasingly confronted with questions regarding the legitimacy of their work, their close proximity to their sources which can compromise objectivity, and their ability to verify information with on-the-ground reporting. This is what Ferrucci (2022) describes as 'how actors within sports journalism delineate and navigate the boundaries of the profession' (2,064). Due to their heightened proximity to sports stars and their unique access to insider information, sports journalists were previously regarded as esteemed gatekeepers and as the myth-makers of sport (Boyle 2013). Due to the proliferation of information made available by the Internet and social media, in addition to the growing strength of sports organisations, scholars suggest that this is no-longer the case. McCarra (2010) argues: 'Access to the Internet has done away with the assumption that journalists have access to a higher knowledge. The press fool themselves [that] they can be a priesthood who own a sacred knowledge.'

This topic is particularly notable in an Olympic context, given the diverse range of niche sports which comprise the Games, in addition to the deep level of expert knowledge required to cover the complex Olympic Movement (Kidd 2013). These specialised Olympic journalists who possess detailed insight about sports including athletics, swimming and gymnastics, play a crucial role in highlighting the contemporary relevance of sports journalism. By focusing on one sub-section of sports journalism (Olympic journalists) scholars can elicit insights about the profession more broadly. The consequences of sports journalists being side-lined and bypassed are significant. The

weakened professional position of sports journalists means that stories get missed (MacNeill 2002). Less capacity for investigative sports journalism also leads to a rise in misinformation spreading (Weedon et al. 2018). Important topics do not get reported because there are fewer sports journalists available to cover them. Those sports journalists who are available must make more concessions in their reporting too. However, making these compromises risks undermining professional integrity (Moritz 2014).

Noting the continued integration of the gambling industry into American sports in recent years, and the worrying new potential to exploit college athletes in the wake of recent Name, Image and Likeness (NIL) deals, O'Brien (2024) highlights the growing absence of sports journalists as a concern. He argues: 'Bookies aren't operating in the shadows and college boosters aren't paying athletes under the table. It's all happening as fewer reporters are around. In a time that demands watchdog journalism, many of the watchdogs are watching from the couch.' In this sense, Boyle (2012) asserts that sports journalists have always 'traded on the myth of access to the inside story around sports culture' (95) and their heightened ability to deliver this to audiences. Recent scholars have shed light on many of the myths of sports journalism and this has resulted in a re-evaluation of the public's relationship with the profession. Mirroring wider trends, there is now less trust in sports journalists than before (Lambert 2018). Added to this, sports organisations have also become less dependent on sports journalists than in the past (Sherwood et al. 2016).

(iii) Sports organisations

This section addresses previous studies which have focused specifically on sports organisations. Alongside sports journalists, they represent the other core party which this study investigates. There have been a small number of studies which specifically centre on the communications and media dynamics of different sports organisations (Suggs 2016, Sherwood et al. 2017; Sherwood and Nicholson 2017). As noted by Sherwood et al. (2016): 'Despite the widespread use of communication platforms by sports organisations [this is] a significant gap in the research field' (514). Previous studies have addressed media strategies at FIFA (Jennings 2011; Eisenhauer et al. 2014; Labiba and Ibrahim 2017; Rowe 2017; Manoli and Anagnostou 2022), the NFL (Castonguay 2021) and rugby organisations including the All Blacks and Munster (Scherer and Jackson 2008;

O'Callaghan 2011). These studies have focused particularly on how these organisations respond to scandals and implement crisis communication. They specify the need for these organisations to reach out to sports journalists, with the objective of controlling media narratives and limiting reputational damage. For example, exploring the role of media in coverage of the 2015 FIFA scandal which centred on allegations of corruption and bribery, Rowe (2017) found that sports journalists 'colluded with FIFA by routinely neglecting or downplaying' (516) accusations against them. There has yet to be any significant research of this kind on the communications and media strategies of the IOC, which is a substantial research gap within sports communications studies. A focus for scholars on sports organisations has been the growing production of in-house content (Scherer and Jackson 2008; Berke 2011; Frandsen 2016; English 2022), their use of social media platforms (Wang and Zhou 2015; Naraine and Parent 2017; McEnnis 2023; Broms 2023) and the ongoing tension between these sports organisations and the journalists who cover them (Rowe 2017; Sherwood, Nicholson and Marjoribanks 2017; O'Boyle and Gallagher 2023).

In their study of the impact of sports organisations' digital and social channels on media access, Sherwood et al. (2017) argue that there has been a power balance shift which has tipped in favour of sports organisations. They argue that due to the rise of social media platforms and new digital media technologies, sports organisations no-longer depend on journalists as heavily as before. In the past, these organisations, sports teams, franchises and federations, needed journalists to produce media coverage that promoted their activities and events. Now, sports organisations can produce much of this content themselves. This means they can bypass journalists, co-opt their functions, and control their own narratives by focusing on the production of their own in-house articles, videos and podcasts. This content brings increased sponsorship and commercial opportunities for these sports organisations too. Sherwood et al. (2017) draw attention to the gatekeeping power which is yielded by sports organisations. They decide which journalists are granted press credentials and can dictate the level of access given to members of the media for interviews with athletes, coaches and officials. Because sports organisations no-longer need journalists to the same extent as previous decades, access has been restricted more and more. A key concern, as noted by Rowe (2017), is that the majority of journalistic coverage of sport has been 'too heavily weighted to information provided through routine channels, rather than excavated through critical investigative practice' (526). This argument suggests that, historically, sports journalists have relied too much on official information provided by sports organisations.

Now that sports organisations no-longer depend as heavily on their coverage, journalists have been left unsure how to navigate their roles in this information vacuum.

Social media also offers sports organisations the ability to directly connect with their fans without the need for an intermediary such as journalists (Grimmer and Horky 2018). This means that sports organisations can produce content which positively frames themselves, therefore avoiding the watchdog and gatekeeping functions of journalists to scrutinise them (Boyle and Hayes 2014). The once 'mutually beneficial, symbiotic relationship' (Sherwood et al. 2017, 514) between sports organisations and journalists has been broken. Mapping out what their relationship will look like in an ever-evolving media landscape is a challenge to confront for all parties. Mirer (2022) builds on this power balance shift by investigating how in-house reporters fit into this new sports media system. For this author, the press box 'symbolizes the symbiotic relationship between media outlets and sports organisations' and suggests the influx of in-house journalists into these spaces has resulted in a paradigm shift. He argues that in-house reporters 'accentuate professional similarities to beat reporters' and they use this identity to 'form unique roles' (438) within sports organisations' corporate structures. Sports organisations co-opt the roles of journalists by hiring their own in-house reporters. These in-house reporters produce content which can be juxtaposed with traditional journalism, but ultimately functions as public relations material (Mirer and Wagner 2018; Mirer 2019a). The migration of sports journalists from traditional media publications, for example newspapers and online websites, to positions within sports organisations is an emerging area of scholarly debate (English 2022).

The direct role of staff working within sports organisations, such as media managers, press officers and communications executives, has also been a key area of focus in this space. Sherwood and Nicholson (2017c) explore 'the construction of the sport media agenda' (992) by looking at how media staff in Australian Football Rules clubs influence the production of news. They found that sports organisations provide 'highly negotiated' (992) information to sports journalists, but also heavily limit access, which highlights their ability to 'significantly control the subsequent media agenda' (992). These are important observations which build a case for the presence of defensive mediatization strategies (discussed in more depth later in this chapter), although they are not explicitly labelled as such. Their study emphasises previous research showing a power balance shift between sports organisations and sports journalists, specifically focussing on the techniques

employed to restrict and impede journalists. However, comparisons with other sports organisations outside of Australia which interview internal media staff are currently lacking.

Social media influencers represent a significant new emerging actor into the sports media landscape. They are being increasingly utilised by sports organisations, who now hire these influencers to produce social media content which positively frames their activities and events. McEnnis (2023) provides one of the first studies that examines the role of social media influencers within sport. His observations about how these online influencers may replace traditional journalists is important, with McEnnis using the term 'influencer–sports journalist' (430) to describe this new trend. In this study, he found that the use of these new influencers blurs the boundaries between journalism and public relations material: 'The assumption that sports journalists should highlight social injustice does not always apply to all practitioners' (430). The consequences of these new influencers in the sports media landscape, their explicit use by sports organisations, and what this means for coverage of global sporting events such as the Olympics are all necessary to consider. Overall, a modest collection of research exists which investigates sports organisations from the perspective of communications and media. These studies have addressed topics such as the use of in-house content, the influx of social media influencers, the gatekeeping abilities of sports organisations, and the role played by internal media staff. Sherwood et al. (2017) implore sports media scholars to contribute new empirical evidence to help alleviate the current research gap with regards to sports organisations. The proliferation of new digital platforms means they now possess 'multiple ways to communicate through channels they can control' (Sherwood et al. 2017, 516). However, the implications and consequences of these changes have yet to be fully explored.

(iv) Olympic sports journalism

There has been a small but notable body of work which specifically analyses the role, identity and opinions of Olympic journalists (Smith 2011; Kristiansen and Hanstad 2012; Steen 2012; Miah 2017; Flindall and Wassong 2017; Gutierrez and Bettine 2020; Robertson 2024). These studies are a useful starting point to obtain a greater understanding of journalists' experiences reporting on the Games. However, the limited supply of research pertaining to these professionals gives a justification for further studies. As noted by Robertson (2024): 'Despite the importance of

journalists to the production of the Olympic spectacle, there has been relatively little research that examines how Olympics reporters think about what it means to report on the Games' (82-83). The Olympic Games is the largest sporting event in the world and investigating the practices, conduct and work of journalists who report on this event is significant and necessary (Jennings 2011). The role of the media in shaping and creating the Olympic Games has been well documented, but it is notable that the role of journalists in the mediatization of the Games has been insufficiently recognised (Horky and Budiasa 2024).

Robertson (2024) provides the most recent and substantial investigation into Olympic journalists. In her study, she interviews journalists who covered the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics to gain a greater understanding about critical reporting of the Games. Defining 'critical journalism', she explains this is 'reporting that takes a structural approach to questioning the existential value of the Olympic project' (95). She calls attention to the lack of research that focuses on media members who produce content about the Olympics. She points out how much of the existing Olympic media research focuses on media content (Kovacs et al. 2020), rather than the professionals who are producing this content, such as journalists. Her study explores how Olympic journalists have the ability to 'bolster powerful institutions and dominant ideologies, or to challenge them' (81). In their reporting, journalists can regurgitate pro-Olympic messages provided by the IOC which positively frame the Games. Alternatively, they can perform a watchdog function, question authority and draw attention to injustices and infringements.

This study explores the ability of journalists to do the latter, observing that 'sports institutions' tight control of press access' (85) is a factor in impeding journalists. However, this study does not dwell on the IOC's role in restricting journalists. This is a noticeable limitation. In her concluding remarks, Robertson says her study, which interviewed only 10 Olympic journalists, 'is a call for further research that explores Olympics journalism by paying attention to its producers' (2024, 94). Her study's analysis of Olympic journalists is particularly significant due to its observations regarding the existence of an 'Olympic mafia' (91). Robertson uses this term to describe veteran journalists whose professional identity is built upon attending the Olympics. Because of this, they are more likely to produce reporting which is praiseworthy of the IOC and their events. This categorisation allows us to understand ways the IOC manages journalists and can potentially leverage their motivations and identities to produce positive coverage. Likewise, Robertson's

observations about the different roles performed by Olympic journalists, simultaneously covering sporting events and non-sporting matters off the field, are salient. They align with Rowe's (2017) observation about journalists' coverage of FIFA: 'Organisational governance is not the most media-friendly of subjects, and it is apparent that many sports journalists have little interest in, and knowledge of, the subject' (520).

A key study which similarly applies the methodology approach of interviewing Olympic journalists is provided by Flindall and Wassong (2017). In their study, they interview a series of opinion-forming journalists to get their perspective on the role of Olympic journalists and their views on the principles of Olympism (the concept of Olympism is discussed further in the second section of this chapter). These authors sought to obtain a deeper understanding of how Olympic journalists perceive themselves, their colleagues, their profession, and their role in constructing meaning about the Olympic Games through their work. Again, like Robertson (2024), this study is limited by interviewing only seven Olympic journalists. The framing of their study also does not pay significant attention towards the role of the IOC, merely noting that 'the IOC [is] dependent on the media to spread Olympic messages' (Flindall and Wassong 2017, 120). They do not investigate the dynamics or interactions between the IOC and Olympic journalists. Rather, the focus of their study is obtaining the opinions of these journalists on the Olympic Movement and what it means to them.

This study is useful because it offers a deeper insight into the viewpoint of Olympic journalists on the Olympic Movement. It delineates their mentality, explores what motivates them to cover the Olympics and gives some limited insight into how they view the IOC. The focus of this study does not adequately consider the role of the IOC and their impact on setting the terms and conditions for the journalism that is produced. It does not acknowledge how journalists can be conditioned, restricted and guided in their work by the environment which is established by the IOC. This is the organisation which stages the Olympics and can therefore significantly dictate the terms of its coverage in the media. As such, although Flindall and Wassong's (2017) study is useful, it is limited by not acknowledging the power of the IOC to create a working environment which is conducive to positive coverage and restricts the potential for negative depictions of the Games. Like others, their study does not incorporate any interviews with officials who work at the IOC to get their perspective on journalists, which is a limitation. This offers scope for further research.

Similarly, the work of Olympic journalists is also explored in depth by Miah, García and Zhihui (2008), who focus on the role of citizen journalists covering the 2008 Beijing Games. They provide a deeply informative alternative perspective on this subject. Their study raises important questions regarding the criteria for defining an Olympic journalist and how they should act. This is a fundamental question at the crossroads of sports journalism and Olympic studies. It elaborates on discussions regarding how Olympic journalists define their role, but emphasises how the ultimate determination of who qualifies as an Olympic journalist rests with the IOC. This is because the IOC is the authority which grants and denies press credentials. Miah et al. (2008) question whether an individual can identify as an Olympic journalist if they have not been allocated official press accreditation to attend. They debate the role of non-accredited, unofficial members of the press, who may provide critical coverage which the IOC does not welcome. Miah et al. (2008) caution that the IOC must be viewed as a powerful gatekeeper. They state that the goal of their study is to examine 'the processes of change in journalism, using the accreditation process at the Olympics as a lens' (320). This represents a significant observation concerning the authority and criteria used to define who an Olympic journalist is: journalists themselves, or the organisations who control access, issue accreditation and ultimately create the environment where journalism is allowed to take place.

This incorporates discussions about the role of normal ordinary citizens who do not have journalistic training, but produce content which could still be labelled as journalism. Miah et al. (2008) note that when we incorporate the often-ignored role of citizen journalism within the boundaries of sports journalism, we see that 'the concept of "the journalist" has changed' (320). Due to the emergence of social media influencers and content creators, hired by sports organisations including the IOC, the lines are continuing to blur over what constitutes sports journalism (English 2014; Grimmer and Horky 2018), what is simply public relations material, and what can be categorised as independent citizen-produced content. This point has become timelier and more relevant in recent Olympics, with the IOC actively encouraging athlete-produced social media content, particularly on TikTok (O'Neill 2024). The role played by each producer is important to reflect upon, especially when we analyse how the IOC uses journalists and their motivations for encouraging or impeding their work. The online content produced by independent journalists, citizen journalists, hired content creators and Olympic athletes each has different benefits and setbacks for the IOC. What remains unresolved within this small body of existing

research into Olympic journalists, however, is the fundamental question over which party decides who can be defined as an Olympic journalist: journalists themselves, their audiences, or the IOC. Flindall and Wassong (2017) suggest that many Olympic journalists are fearful of 'IOC propaganda-like persuasion' (129) but remain subservient to the organisation because they can refuse these journalists media credentials to attend the Games.

2.4 Olympic studies

(i) History of the IOC and the Olympic Movement today

Founded in 1894, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) is the organisation whose primary responsibility is staging the modern Summer and Winter Olympic Games. It has been the subject of a wide variety of in-depth academic studies since its foundation. Due to its global significance, it draws attention from scholars from many disciplines. Recent studies have focused on topics such as the IOC's commitment to human rights (Byrne and Ludvigsen 2023), its role in sustainability (Petersen-Wagner and Ludvigsen 2023) and its place as a policymaker (Jastrząbek 2024). Despite the abundance of literature which has already examined the IOC, there is still a lack of scholarly focus on its relationship with journalists. This section provides important contextual information about the IOC, its significance and how it is structured. After this, the next sections will address the role of the Olympic Charter with regards to the media, the IOC's guidelines for journalists and previous studies into the IOC.

The IOC oversees the Olympic Movement (see Appendix H for more information on the Olympic Movement) and organises a number of other international sporting events, such as the Youth Olympic Games (Miller 2012). The IOC tasks itself with spreading awareness of Olympism, which is the philosophy of its founder, Baron Pierre de Coubertin. The well-known Olympic Motto, written in Latin, summarises the overarching sentiments of Baron de Coubertin: *"Citius, Altius, Fortius – Communiter"* or "Faster, Higher, Stronger – Together". His philosophy of Olympism is underpinned by a number of principles which are inscribed in the Olympic Charter. These principles include: the promotion of ethics and good governance in sport, the education of youth through sport, ensuring the spirit of fair play prevails and violence is avoided, supporting the development and coordination of sports competitions, and to ensure the regular celebration of the

Olympic Games (IOC Olympic Charter 2023). The IOC is a sports governing body which, although based in Switzerland, is a non-governmental organisation (NGO). It employs over 500 people at its headquarters in Lausanne (Chappelet 2016). As of 2024, it oversees 206 recognised NOCs, which are National Olympic Committees. NOCs are smaller, individual organisations who govern each country's Olympic affairs. NOCs organise their country's team of athletes for each edition of the Olympic Games. At the time of the Paris 2024 Games, the IOC is currently governed by 107 active Members. Together, these are the men and women who act as the supreme governing authority for all Olympic affairs (IOC 2023). As noted by Krieger and Wassong (2020) in the *Routledge Handbook of the Olympic and Paralympic Games*, despite their significant influence, 'the role of Members of the IOC as umbrella organisations of the international sport system has been little discussed in previous research' (203).
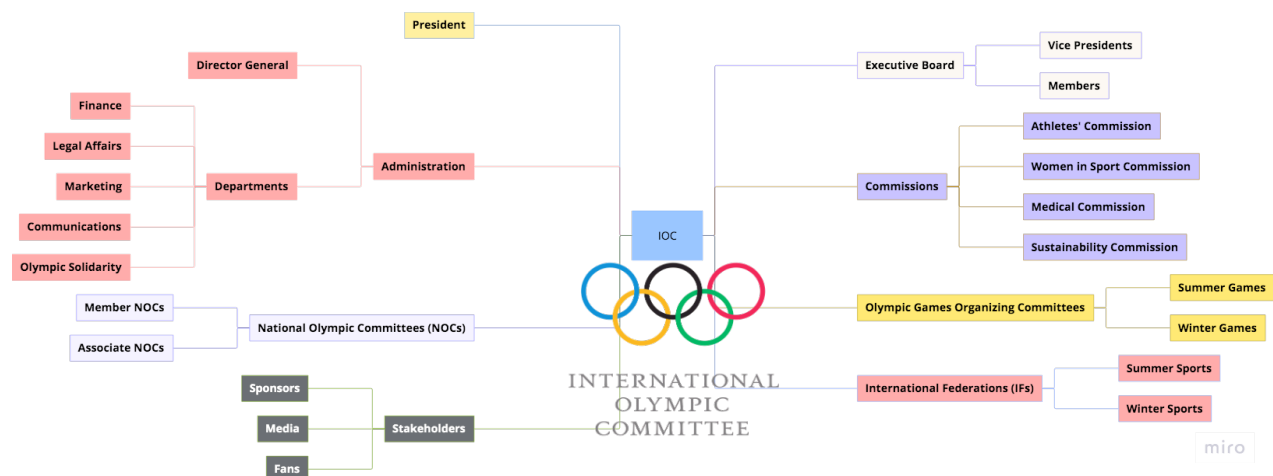
Figure 1: Organisational structure of the International Olympic Committee (IOC).

Decisions concerning the staging of the Olympics, host cities, the inclusion and exclusion of sports and athletes, rules and regulations, are all made at IOC Sessions (Chappelet 2008b). IOC Sessions are the landmark meeting of the organisation's membership which are held once per year (see Appendix F for more information on IOC Sessions). At IOC Sessions, amendments to the IOC Charter are discussed, elections for IOC membership are voted on, as well as votes to decide the host city for future Olympic Games (Goldblatt 2018). The IOC is led by former Olympic fencing gold medallist Thomas Bach, who has served as President since 2013 and will depart his role in 2025. The IOC is a significantly wealthy organisation thanks to advertising and commercial agreements with sponsors (Horne and Whannel 2016). These major sponsorship agreements are

facilitated through the Olympic Partner (TOP) programme, which allocates global marketing rights of the Olympic Games to an exclusive group of Worldwide Olympic Partners (Yazdanparast and Bayar 2020; Baim et al. 2021). These include Coca-Cola, Visa, Samsung, Intel, Toyota and Deloitte. For the 2023 financial year, the IOC generated $902 million in revenue. The organisation stated that it has secured $7.3 billion in revenue for the 2025-2028 Olympic cycle and $6.2 billion for 2029-2032 (Sim 2024).

The IOC describes itself as a non-profit organisation which redistributes 90% of its revenue 'to assist athletes and develop sport worldwide' (IOC 2024). The remaining 10% of its revenue is spent on what it describes as 'IOC operations and activities' (IOC 2024). For this, the organisation has faced historic criticism (Boykoff 2016). This is due to allegations of excessive spending for the benefit of IOC Members on 'first-class plane tickets, accommodation in five-star hotels, and lavish dinners' (Lubin 2010). There have been a number of texts written about the founding and historic development of the IOC and its role in organising the Olympic Games (Bousfield et al. 2012; Goldblatt 2018; Boykoff 2022). From an academic discipline, scholars have examined the IOC in a wide range of topics such as governance (Zakus and Skinner 2008; MacAloon 2011; Chappelet 2016), politics (Van Luijk 2018) and law (Ettinger 1992; Gauthier 2016). The IOC has been studied in terms of corruption in sport (Mason et al. 2006), its role in environmental and sustainability affairs (Paquette et al. 2011), its duty towards the well-being of athletes (Wassong 2018) and the impact of sports diplomacy (Postlethwaite and Grix 2016).

Today, the IOC is recognised as one of the most powerful and influential sporting organisations in the world (Chappelet 2016). It sits atop the Olympic Movement, which is defined as: 'the concerted, organised, universal and permanent action, carried out under the supreme authority of the IOC, of all individuals and entities who are inspired by the values of Olympism.' (Olympic.com 2024). The objective of the Olympic Movement is 'building a peaceful and better world by educating youth through sport practised in accordance with Olympism and its values.' The IOC, based in Lausanne, does this alongside 70 officially recognised International Sports Federations (IFs) and 206 National Olympic Committees (NOCs) across the world of sport. The organisation is administered by Director General Christophe De Kepper. It is guided by a document called "Olympic Agenda 2020+5" which is the IOC's strategic roadmap for digitisation, solidarity, sustainability and economics.

As of 2024, the IOC contains 28 different Commissions. These have specific responsibility for a multitude of areas. Examples include the IOC Athletes' Commission, Culture and Olympic Heritage Commission, Digital Engagement and Marketing Communications Commission, Ethics Commission, Gender Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Commission. The IOC's purpose is to organise and stage the Olympic Games, promote its philosophy of Olympism, lead the Olympic Movement, and work in accordance with other sporting bodies to do so. It is a complex, professional and financially successful organisation, which is guided by a number of internal Commissions and working groups, who offer expertise on specific areas of sport and Olympic affairs (Kidd 2013). The IOC Executive Board is headed by its President Thomas Bach, aided by 107 official IOC Members, who meet together at its annual IOC Session (see Appendix G for more information on IOC Members). Internally, communications forms one aspect of the IOC, but a highly important one. The IOC employs robust communications teams who's combined objective is to promote the organisation and uphold the IOC's brand, credibility and reputation (Peña 2024). This is achieved through a combination of internal communications content and engaging with external media such as journalists and broadcasters.
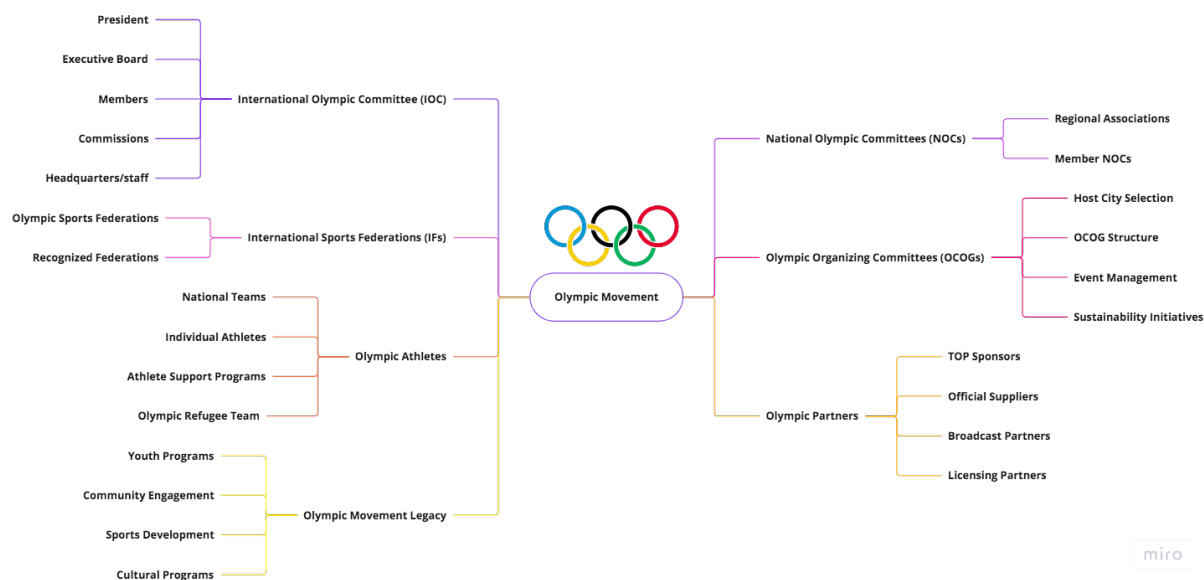
Figure 2: The Olympic Movement, all entities which comprise the Olympic Games.

As noted by Chappelet (2016), the 'huge expansion of the IOC' (739) since the 1980s in terms of staff, spending and resources has been significant, and this applies to its media and communications teams too. He states that media represent an important stakeholder within the Olympic Movement: '[The IOC] has moved from a relatively traditional form of administration

without staff, to a form of governance that has to take into account a diverse network of stakeholders who exert their influence and, since the 1980s, have enjoyed substantial financial resources' (739). As such, like all modern professional sports organisations (Sherwood et al. 2017) the IOC employs communications staff whose responsibilities include producing in-house content, managing Olympic social media channels, issuing press releases, and writing newsletters. Responsibilities also include responding to journalists' inquiries, setting up interviews, providing media training to staff, hosting press conferences and monitoring media coverage about the IOC (Wei and Chen 2023; Peña 2024). The IOC publishes articles on its official website, Olympics.com, and produces digital content through the Olympic Channel, which is the IOC's official internal television service set up after the 2016 Rio Olympics. The Olympic Channel was launched to maintain year-round interest in the Games and attract younger audiences through a variety of live sporting content and sports documentaries (Xu and Billings 2021).

(ii) Olympic Charter and IOC media guidelines

The Olympic Charter is a constitutional document which defines the principles of Olympism and guides the IOC in its decision-making and governance. It is vital in terms of our understanding of the IOC's relationship with the media. Therefore, before we can begin to assess the IOC's relationship with journalists, we first must scrutinise the documents which regulate the boundaries of their relationship. As stated by Adi (2013), who conducted a thematic analysis of media regulations within the Olympic Charter, the charter is 'among the key documents which address the media and its relationship with the IOC and the Olympic Movement' (48). Article 48 of the Olympic Charter specifically addresses the relationship between the IOC and the media. It discusses how 'changes brought about by technological advances and transformations of how journalists conduct their work' (Adi 2013, 48) influenced the IOC's evolving relationship with the media. Over time, thanks to the development of radio, then television, media coverage increased with each new edition of the Games. This meant the IOC has consistently needed to reassess its interactions with members of the media — initially broadcast and print, and now online media too (Kidd 2013). As such, the Olympic Charter has been updated throughout the decades to reflect technological developments in media.

According to Adi (2013), these changes have occurred with the dual objective to maintain as much media coverage of the Games as possible, while also maintaining the IOC's power, influence and

profitability over this coverage. The purpose of mentioning the media within the Olympic Charter is to officially enshrine the IOC's power and control over the coverage of its events. This constitutional declaration ensures the IOC can, to the best of its abilities, dictate and control the terms and conditions of journalists' coverage. The IOC's explicit mentions of 'journalists' within the Olympic Charter are minimal and vague, which gives the IOC leeway and flexibility in terms of enforcing media regulations and conditions on journalists. In Article 48 of the Olympic Charter, the IOC states: '(1) The IOC takes all necessary steps in order to ensure the fullest coverage by the different media and the widest possible audience in the world for the Olympic Games. (2) All decisions concerning the coverage of the Olympic Games by the media rest within the competence of the IOC' (Olympic Charter 2024, 93). Notably, in a bye-law to Article 48, the IOC adds: 'Only those persons accredited as media may act as journalists, reporters or in any other media capacity. Under no circumstances, throughout the duration of the Olympic Games, may any athlete, coach, official, press attaché or any other accredited participant act as a journalist or in any other media capacity' (Olympic Charter 2024, 93).

As will be discussed later in this dissertation, this bye-law highlights the power of the IOC to categorise who a journalist is and draws a constitutional distinction between official journalists and non-journalists. The prominence of athletes producing their own digital content and the growing proliferation of social media influencers producing Olympics content is noteworthy. It raises questions in terms of defining who a journalist is, and what content can be labelled as journalism, which I will return to in the findings and discussion chapters. Overall, the Olympic Charter represents an important document as it officially recognises the role of journalists in covering the Olympic Games. It establishes the boundaries of the relationship between the IOC and the media and, notably, makes a distinction between journalists and non-journalists. The Olympic Charter highlights the power of the IOC to set the terms and conditions for journalists to operate within. Ultimately, this shows how the IOC has constitutional legitimacy for enforcing defensive strategies to impede journalists and control media coverage of their events.

Building on the Olympic Charter and how it enshrines the role of the media, the IOC also formulates and issues specific guidelines to the media. IOC media guidelines are most notably sent to members of the press ahead of each edition of the Olympic Games (Olympic Broadcasting Services 2022; International Olympic Committee 2024). The Olympic Broadcasting Services also

issue their own additional media guides to journalists 'to provide an in-depth overview of who OBS is and how OBS helps deliver the best coverage of the Games possible to their audiences.' (Olympic Broadcasting Services 2021, 2). In their media guidelines, the IOC set out specific descriptions about the conduct of journalists who have been accredited to attend the Games. These guidelines include useful information for journalists on obtaining press credentials, attending press conferences and contact information for the IOC's media relations teams. Notably, the IOC states in their Paris 2024 media guidelines that: 'You may not act as a journalist, reporter or in any other media capacity unless you are a journalist with a valid accreditation' (International Olympic Committee 2024, 4). This stipulation mirrors the language discussed previously within the Olympic Charter whereupon the IOC is keen to distinguish between journalists and non-journalists. Clearly, the IOC defines journalists as those who have been issued with official accreditation by the organisation and categorises others, such as citizen journalists, content creators, social media influencers, outside the realms of journalism.

The allocation of press credentials bestows the title of journalist onto an individual. How the IOC comes to the decision of who it chooses to issue media accreditation to, and how it measures who is worthy of such credentials, is not divulged in its media guidelines. This gives the IOC full flexibility and autonomy to decide who attends its events and therefore can dictate media coverage to a significant degree (Almeida et al. 2020). Additionally, in its media guidelines, the IOC provides information about the language used by journalists in their coverage of the Games. This also raises challenges, as some Olympic journalists consider whether such information is merely *suggested* to them, or if there is a necessity to strictly comply with the IOC's guidelines in terms of the language used by reporters. Ultimately, the issuing of media guidelines by the IOC, akin to the regulations outlined in the Olympic Charter, provides key insights into how the IOC perceives journalists. As official documents they serve as a framework for how the IOC wishes to assist, guide and instruct their conduct.

(iii) Media studies of the Olympic Games and the IOC

There is an extensive body of research which examines the Olympic Games from a media perspective (Billings 2008; Billings and Brown 2013; Kidd 2013; Boykoff and Yasuok 2015; Abanazir 2022; Busacca 2023). This is unsurprising given the media's importance to the Games, which reached a global media audience of 4.5 billion during the Rio Olympics (International

Olympic Committee 2019). According to Engelman et al. (2014) the media plays a fundamental role in constructing the identity, brand, and public understanding of the Games. He contends this is the case because the vast majority of individuals do not attend the Games in person, but experience the Olympics through media. As a result, media coverage has 'profound impacts on citizens' views of topics such as gender, nationality, and the perceived importance of some sports over others' (Eagleman et al. 2014, 457). In their critical overview of Olympic media research between 1999 and 2018, Geurin and Naraine (2020) observe that scholarship has been limited to the Summer Olympics, the United States and newspaper accounts of the Games. These studies utilised agenda setting, content analysis and media framing. They suggest that researchers must expand their scope beyond media coverage. They call for further research which examines the Olympics from the perspective of media producers and for studies which directly analyse the IOC as an organisation, as opposed to the Games as an event. They state that content creators, journalists and IOC communication are largely missing from the current literature (Geurin and Naraine 2020). With regard to the IOC, there have been a small selection of studies which examine areas of media. Subjects recently addressed include an analysis of the IOC's guidelines for social media use by Olympic athletes (Busacca 2023), an examination of the IOC's public statements during the Covid-19 Pandemic (Almeida et al. 2020; Wong 2024) and an analysis of content produced by the IOC's official Olympic Channel (Xu and Billings 2021).

Aside from this limited supply of media research about the IOC, the bulk of media studies about the Olympics has focused on areas pertaining to the Games as a television event (Rivenburgh 2002; Billings 2008; Peña 2009; Whannel 2012; Solberg and Gratton 2013), Olympic sponsorship (Barney et al. 2002; Boykoff 2016; Yazdanparast and Bayar 2020; Baim et al. 2021) and media coverage of Olympic athletes (Hutchins and Mikosza 2008; Kristiansen and Hanstad 2012; Kovacs 2020; Li et al. 2022). Other media topics include audience consumption habits (Devlin et al. 2020), E-Sports (Miah and Fenton 2020, Abanazir 2022, Ribeiro et al. 2023, Anastácio et al. 2023), social media (Liu 2016; Li et al. 2018; Grimmer and Horky 2018), branding (Smith et al. 2023) and media coverage of gender (Daddario 1997; Eagleman et al. 2014; Boykoff and Yasuoka 2015; Salido-Fernández and Muñoz-Muñoz 2021; Grabmüllerov 2022). This research is useful because it showcases the significant impact of media content on constructing the Olympic identity. It emphasises that the Olympics and media are inherently linked and there is a mutual benefit involved for the IOC and external media that cover the event. Media publications report on the

Olympics because it offers intriguing storylines and entertaining sporting events which draws significant audiences and, as a result, advertising opportunities (Baim et al. 2021). For the IOC and the Olympic Movement, the media is a vehicle through which it can promote its events, draw audiences, sell tickets and merchandise and also attract sponsorship opportunities. Kristiansen and Hanstad (2012) encapsulate this dynamic in their study of Norwegian journalists who cover the Olympics. They note that both parties are 'working together' and there is a requirement from sports organisations 'to be understanding of journalists' need for stories and inside information' (231).

Literature in this area clearly highlights the intrinsic link between the Olympics and media, however there is still insufficient focus on the IOC and its communications policies. No studies have adequately addressed the IOC's relationship with journalists. This is a stark research gap given the quantity of media coverage produced by journalists about the Games since its inception. Apart from the notable exception of Xu and Billings (2021), few studies have directly interviewed officials working at the IOC who operate in a media or communications capacity. Their study analyses digital media content produced by the IOC-created Olympic Channel through the lens of gender, interviewing employees to understand their work practices and attitudes. This is the closest the current literature has come to understanding the media functions of the IOC. Although it is also important to distinguish the Olympic Channel as connected to, but still separate from, the IOC. As noted by Geurin and Naraine (2020), media research about the Olympics has typically focused on the event itself, rather than the sporting organisation and leadership figures involved in staging the Games. Similarly, they observe the dearth of research which examines the role played by journalists at the Olympics. It is a significant research gap given that media members attending the Games outnumbers athletes taking part. More than 25,000 media personnel attended the 2016 Rio Olympics compared to just over 11,000 athletes (Almeida et al. 2020, 66). In terms of methodological approaches, Geurin and Naraine (2020) found that few researchers employ qualitative interview-based studies (just 3.5% of Olympic media research have used interviews). Instead, researchers have favoured alternative methodologies such as content analysis of Olympic media products (76.5%), surveys (10.9%) and historical analysis (3.9%).

This overview of Olympic media research highlights the significant body of scholarship which has scrutinised the Games' link with media. This includes a diverse range of topics like sponsorship, branding, social media, gender and television. However, it also exposes the limitations and gaps

of Olympic media research, most notably in terms of its methodological approaches (which have largely avoided qualitative interviews), an absence of studies about IOC communications and a significant lack of focus on the important role played by journalists covering the Olympics. As noted by Chappelet (2016), external media like journalists are a significant stakeholder when we inspect the administration and structure of the Olympic Movement. The presence of journalists at the Games is enshrined in the Olympic Charter. Highlighting the importance of journalists, former IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch declared: 'In all their forms, the media form an integral part of the Olympic Movement and belong, in the fullest sense of the term, to the Olympic Family' (MacNeill 2002, 100). This observation draws attention to the importance which the IOC places on journalists. However, it also raises important considerations about journalists' desire to be recognised as part of the Olympic Movement, while also remaining objective and independent observers who produce unbiased reporting.

2.5 Mediatization

(i) Mediatization as a theoretical framework

The third and final section of this chapter provides a critical examination of literature pertaining to mediatization studies, which is the theoretical backbone of this study. This analysis entails an in-depth evaluation of the field by highlighting prior studies which have applied mediatization to the examination of sports media. The discussion begins with a definition of mediatization, followed by an outline of its key characteristics and advantages as an analytical framework, before a consideration of its critiques (Couldry 2008; Witschge 2014; Deacon and Strayer 2014). I explore the institutionalist approach to mediatization, highlighting its distinctions from alternative schools of thought. After this, I critically evaluate studies which highlight the mediatization of journalism, sport and the Olympic Games. I finish this section by integrating the recently pioneered concept of defensive mediatization, which will be the primary focus of this study discussed in later chapters.

Mediatization is an ongoing, non-linear process which characterizes changes in practices, cultures and institutions within media-saturated societies, thereby highlighting long-term transformations of these societies (Lundby 2014). It addresses adaptations within institutions and public spheres which are infused by the workings of the media. Hepp (2013) states that mediatization represents

a cumulative process in which 'the variety of media, with different institutionalizations and reifications, increase over time' (620-21). Media has permeated nearly every facet of contemporary society. Leading mediatization scholars, including Stig Hjarvard and Knut Lundby, argue it is a way to conceptualise how media changes institutions such as politics, religion, education and, in the case of this study, sport. As argued by Hepp, Hjarvard and Lundby (2010, 223): 'As institutionalized and technological means of communication, media have become integral to very different contexts of human life' (223). Media is now a ubiquitous aspect of each of these institutions within society, while at the same time the media also acts as its own unique, singular pillar too. Hjarvard (2008a) views mediatization as an effort to understand and conceptualise how media are implicated in facilitating cultural and social change and 'come to condition, but not determine, human interaction' (106). This is a view of mediatization which emphasises the power and influence of media in setting the terms and conditions of modern communication, without entirely colonising the ways we interact completely.

Scholars have used mediatization to examine a diverse variety of areas in recent years, including religion (Hjarvard 2008b; Thomas 2016; Lundby 2018), war (McQuail 2006; Horten 2011; Crosbie 2015), politics (Strömbäck 2008; Campus 2010; Cervi et al. 2022) and increasingly sport (Frandsen 2014, 2016, 2020, 2023; Birkner and Nölleke 2016; Kim et al. 2022). What denotes mediatization as a unique theoretical concept is that it concerns the effects of media on institutions, as opposed to the effects of 'specific message content on audiences' (Littlejohn et al. 2017, 152). Media ecologists are primarily concerned with *media* as the focus of attention, whereas mediatization scholars begin with institutions themselves. The former analyse how a medium shapes the values and behaviours of a cultural institution. The latter focus on how the inner workings of institutions themselves are redefined (Strömbäck 2013). Mediatization scholars argue that institutions change, consciously and unconsciously, in two ways: through the incorporation of media processes and the concurrent ascendance of media institutions as autonomous, independent institutions in their own right. (Hjarvard 2008a).

There are three key schools of thought within mediatization research: cultural, material and institutional (Lundby 2014). Firstly, it is important to note the cultural tradition has been categorised under the label of a social-constructivist approach (Hepp 2009, 2012, 2013). This tradition highlights how the communicative construction of reality is subsequently manifested

within media processes. Particular features of media form part of the ongoing process whereby 'sociocultural reality is constructed in and through communication' (Couldry and Hepp 2013, 196). Second, a material approach to mediatization is characterised by a focus on properties of the media (Lundby 2014, 22) which are related to the specific communication technologies which are at stake. This materialist approach notes the influence of digitization by focusing on recent decades dominated by the prominence of digital media. Thirdly, an institutionalist approach to mediatization focuses on transformations of institutions, whether political, religious or sporting, analysing how their functions conform to the demands of media (Hjarvard 2013, 2014). It focuses on changes brought about by specific institutional logics and builds upon previous work on the duality of structure and agency put forward by Anthony Giddens (1984).

This perspective pays particular attention to how media obtains power and 'position themselves [into] semi-institutions.' (Lundby 2014, 11). Hjarvard (2013) is a key proponent of an institutionalist approach to mediatization research. In his view, the internally defined norms, processes and hierarchies which characterise individual institutions are fundamental. He observes that, over time, media developed into powerful semi-independent institutions which acted 'chiefly [as] *instruments* in the hands of other institutions' (23). He cites the example of political parties establishing their own newspapers (the party press) in the nineteenth century despite none having a journalistic/editorial board that operated independently of the political party or owner (Hjarvard 2013, 23). In this sense we understand that mediatization is, crucially, a two-way process of accommodation and adaptation. This approach to mediatization posits that institutions conform to the demands of media, viewing them as a useful resource and, similarly, media adapts to the needs of other institutions in a mutually-beneficial way. As Hjarvard (2013) notes: 'In order to tap into this resource, the institution has to have a degree of participation in a media practice, which is evidenced by the increasing use of journalists, information officers and PR consultants' (39). This argument, the extent to which institutions change, conform and accommodate, is key in terms of understanding the influence of journalists. Hjarvard argues that the impact of mediatization can be calculated according to how much each field's autonomous pole has diminished, adding that: 'The media, too, have autonomous and heteronomous poles, [for example] professionalised journalism' (Hjarvard 2013, 40). This position highlights how journalism, as a powerful media institution, is highly suitable to critically analyse via this institutionalist lens of mediatization.

Mediatization is an innovative and influential theoretical framework which helps to reconsider old, yet fundamental questions about the influence of media in culture and society. Despite its merits and many proponents, it is a contested area of research which has faced criticism (Ampuja et al. 2014). Critics of mediatization argue that it is too general, simplistic, and overly ambitious. Deacon and Strayer (2014) label mediatization as a 'conceptual bandwagon' (1,032). They argue that mediatization lacks conceptual rigour and there are 'unforeseen risks' (1,033) in placing too great an emphasis on media actors, logics, and technologies. In this sense, they acknowledge that mediatization suggests a historical process of change, but question how this is conceptualised and analysed. They are sceptical whether there is consensus on when mediatization started and, similarly, cast doubt on the sequential nature of mediatization whereby it has transitioned from an institutionalist perspective (old media) to a social constructivist one (new media). Deacon and Strayer are also cautious about Hepp's (2013) view that there are 'mediatization waves' which posits different 'eruptive moments' (625) like the emergence of print and digitalization. They reject the 'neatness' of this proposition (Deacon and Strayer 2014, 1,037). They elaborate by stating that mediatization is driven by a set of causal variables (the mass media) which are too narrow, that the role of non-media factors in altering communicative practice is often overlooked and that mediatization is too dependent on a media-centric narrative of change.

Similarly, Couldry (2008) argues against the view that mediatization is a continuous and linear process. He stated that the concept of 'mediation' is more suitable and preferable than mediatization. He believed that mediatization fails to grasp the complexity of the 'dialectical processes through which [media] transform society and politics' (389). However, Couldry later reconsidered some of these criticisms by identifying the aforementioned historical waves of mediatization: mechanisation (invention of the printing press), electrification (invention of the telegraph) and digitalisation (the Internet and computer technologies). Added to this, Couldry and Hepp (2017) posit that we may now be entering a new phase identified as 'deep mediatization'. This is a multi-dimensional space of possibility identified as the media manifold (62). This means that the role of media in the social construction of reality is not just pervasive, but deep (O'Boyle 2022, 20). Witschge (2014) adds to these critiques of mediatization from an institutionalist tradition, arguing that it does not give sufficient attention to the audience as actor in the process. She argues that the audience has largely been ignored in terms of its significant influence. She calls for a critical examination of our understanding of mediatization to justify the 'multiplicity of

logics informing media practices, the actors producing news and the interaction between those logics and actors' (Witschge 2014, 342).

Responding to these criticisms, Lunt and Livingston (2016) offer a robust defence of mediatization. They acknowledge arguments made by Deacon and Strayer (2014, 2015), but do not accept them as entirely valid, labelling these criticisms as reductionist. Lunt and Livingston (2016) acknowledge that 'controversy centres on the claim that mediatization is a societal metaprocess' to be compared with globalization, individualization and commercialization. But they argue that substantiating such a claim would necessitate a highly ambitious, evidence-based account of socio-historical change spanning centuries (462). They concede that there continues to be confusion regarding *mediation* versus *mediatization*, but contend that the latter remains a highly useful conceptual framework. In their view, mediatization allows media scholars to achieve a heightened historical awareness. Mediatization can elucidate the extent to which societal transformations manifest across various domains (e.g. politics, sport, education, religion) and can enhance our understanding of other metaprocesses mentioned such as globalization and commercialization (Lunt and Livingston 2016, 465). Nölleke et al. (2021) similarly encourage 'debate and discourse' over mediatization's use, stressing that the process of rigorously critiquing a theory helps to add more legitimacy. They defend its use from an institutionalist perspective, stating that social actors demonstrate an increasing need for public attention, and 'since public attention is provided by the media, mediatization describes attempts to manage media attention' (738).

Despite these critiques of media-centrism, ahistoricism and conceptual clarity (Skey et al. 2017, 588), adopting an institutionalist approach and using mediatization as a theoretical framework has many merits, particularly when analysing institutions such as journalism and sport. Mediatization is a protracted process that provides significant value by conceptualising a critical analysis of the interrelation between the change of media and communication and the change of culture and society (Hepp and Krotz 2014). It highlights the transformation of practices within institutions (such as sports organisations) to meet the demands of media, while simultaneously acknowledging the power of media as its own separate individual institution (news media). As argued by Lundby (2014), these transformations occur via interplay between 'changes in communication media and the societal, political, and cultural context, which includes the transformation of communication

media' (19). In effect, mediatization offers a suitable framework to capture the long-term interrelation processes between media change and social and cultural change, the nuances of which have been neglected by alternative approaches.

(ii) Mediatization of journalism

Mediatization is a framework which has been applied to a variety of institutions such as politics, religion, warfare and sport. There have been a number of recent studies which apply mediatization specifically to the study of journalism which are important to discuss in the context of this research (Kammer 2014; Falasca 2014; Kunelius and Reunanen 2016; Peruško et al. 2020). These studies are notable because they underscore how the institution of journalism, despite itself being a part of media, is equally susceptible to conform to media logic as other spheres of society. The media, as an institution, is diverse and contains many different types of media in different formats and platforms. Journalism, meanwhile, exists as its own separate institution tasked with dissemination information to audiences. Kammer (2014) argues that making this differentiation is key, even though 'the two are closely related and partially overlap' (142). Institutions are defined by a shared set of patterns and norms, extend over time and they preside over social domains (Huntington and Dominguez 1975). Journalism is recognised as an institution because it has a 'shared recognition of newsworthiness', its role as the 'fourth estate of society' and its function in facilitating 'public circulation of knowledge on current affairs' (Kammer 2014, 143). Kunelius and Reunanen (2016) make a convincing argument that at a time when scholars emphasise the growing mediatization of society (Hjarvard 2008a), journalism faces numerous challenges and difficulties: 'The social and cultural significance of "the media" is growing… on the other hand there is ample talk about the "crisis" and the "end" of journalism' (369).

This paradox is highly relevant in confronting these crises within the context of sports journalism. To what extent sports organisations, and their implementation of defensive mediatization strategies, have impacted the viability of sports journalism is a key concern left unexplored. Similarly, to what degree mediatization both positively and negatively impacts the 'core professional practices and values' of journalism (Kunelius and Reunanen 2016, 369) is an important consideration. Kammer (2014) identified different ways in which journalism has

become increasingly mediatized as an institution. In his study of Danish news websites, he notes that increased commercialization, audience participation, and the multi-skilling of journalists demonstrate a process in which 'journalism increasingly subsumes itself to the logic of the media' (141). He identifies this process as mediatization and concludes that through this process, journalism has been changed from an occupational profession into an organisational one. This illustrates that journalism is vulnerable to the power of the media to change its practices, values and principles. The mediatization of journalism is evidenced by the convergence of media platforms, loss of editorial independence due to compromises caused by financial pressures, and a significant change in the relationship between audiences and journalists (Kunelius and Reunanen 2016). Examples of the latter are witnessed in the ongoing interactions between audiences and journalists via social media and the rise of citizen journalism which now sees the public play an active role in the creation and dissemination of news. The extent to which sports journalism is equally susceptible to this process of mediatization has not yet been addressed, however.

Journalism is increasingly 'subordinating itself to the imperatives of the media institution' (Kammer 2014, 141) and this process of conforming to media logic has changed its professionalism as an institution. Mediatization offers an appropriate framework to explain these changes because little attention has previously been given to models which explain the ongoing processes of macro level change within journalism. Kammer's (2014) study adds further empirical support towards adopting an institutionalist approach within mediatization research. It provides a framework for understanding and analysing the institutional changes that result from the media 'constituting an institution in its own right' (Kammer 2014, 142; Hjarvard 2008a; Schrott 2009). Due to its development and growth as a powerful mass media institution throughout the 20th century, journalism is suitable to investigate mediatization as a non-linear process which takes place over a prolonged period of time. To what extent sports journalism has conformed to, or potentially ignores, the media's institutional demands requires further attention. A notable research gap exists in this space which must also acknowledge unique logics of sports journalism and the extent to which the mediatization of journalism applies to this sub-genre of the profession. Likewise, recording the impact of defensive mediatization requires more focus in sports journalism if we are to adequately demonstrate that mediatization is not a one-way process of passive accommodation.

(iii) Sports mediatization

A significant body of research has emerged over the last decade on the mediatization of sport, led primarily by Kirsten Frandsen (2014, 2016, 2020, 2023) who has pioneered a specific focus on this topic. While early mediatization scholars often alluded to the significance of sport as a unique cultural product (Krotz 2009; Hepp 2012; Bolin 2014), these references were often brief, lacking in rigour and failed to consult with prior sports media literature. As described in the opening section of this chapter, in-depth research into the sports media-complex (Jhally 1989; Maguire 1991) by scholars like Wenner, Whannel and Pederson contributed towards the development of sports communication as a distinct field from the 1980s onwards (Wenner 2015). However, it is only in recent decades that mediatization has become incorporated as a popular framework by English-language scholars (Skey et al. 2017). According to Frandsen (2023) the academic community investigating the sports-media nexus has now 'welcomed the agenda set by mediatization scholars' (44) despite a degree of scepticism. This is because sport is highly suitable to analyse through this lens due to its historic link with media. The professionalisation of sport throughout the 20th century is intrinsically linked with increased media coverage through newspapers, magazines, radio and television (Pederson 2013; Haynes and Boyle 2017; Bruce 2017). Similarly, the regularity of sporting events and competitions makes it suitable to inspect the impact of a long-term process such as mediatization over time.

In recent years, a wide variety of sporting topics like Video Assistant Referee (VAR) (Frandsen and Landgrebe 2022; D'Andréa and Stauff 2022), professional tennis (Küpper et al. 2022; Küpper 2024) and young people's engagement with football (Skey et al. 2017) have all been explored using mediatization. In their study into the impact of VAR on Danish football, Frandsen and Landgrebe (2022) found that this new technology decreased the institutional autonomy of football and contributed towards inequalities between larger and smaller European leagues. Adopting a content analysis of tennis autobiographies, Küpper (2022) reported that tennis stars do adapt to perceived media logic, but also 'feel inhibited by the press and reject adaptations to media affordances' (872). Meanwhile, Skey et al. (2017) discovered that digital communications technologies have altered how sport is accessed and enjoyed via streaming services, social media and gaming. Combined, these studies have used different aspects of sport to highlight how

mediatization is an ongoing, non-linear process which combines adaptation and resistance to different types of media depending on social domains and cultural contexts (Ličen et al. 2022). Limitations of this new mediatization research, however, have been its skewed focus on male sports and major commercial sporting events. There are still significant research gaps on the mediatization of women's sports, grassroots/local sport and, notably, major sports organisations.

Mediatization has been adopted in a handful of recent studies specifically in relation to the Olympic Games. Bolin (2014) argues the Olympics shows the epistemological point that sport and media are difficult to separate. On this argument, Frandsen (2023) comments: 'Media and sport have always shaped each other, and sports and events in some cases are born as mediatised phenomena' (44). Because most fans engage with the Games today via television and online media, the Olympics is emblematic of mediatization as a process where media 'become *indispensable* to people's lives' (Jansson 2018, 4; Frandsen 2023). The mediatization of the Olympics is evidenced by audiences' dependency on mediated cultural products (Couldry and Hepp 2017). This dependency increased over time, as the IOC welcomed the advent of radio, then television and now social media to provide extensive media coverage of their event (Tomlinson 2017; Hutchins and Sanderson 2017). The integration of these new technologies and platforms throughout different decades shows how the Olympics is suitable to illustrate mediatization as a non-linear, ongoing meta-process. Studies focusing on the mediatization of the Olympics as a mega-event (Billings and Wenner 2017) have illustrated ways in which the Games have adopted and accommodated media to gain more publicity and increase audiences. However, the Olympics also shows that the integrated character of media means it is difficult to calculate media's role 'imposing themselves on a supposedly previously unmediated phenomenon' (Bolin 2014, 189; Frandsen 2023, 44).

Without sizable media coverage the Olympic Games would not have developed into the spectacle it is today (Wenner 1998; Maguire 1999). According to Panagiotopoulou (2010), who studied mediatization through the lens of the Opening Ceremony at the 2004 Athens Olympics, the Olympic Games has long been viewed as a television and media spectacle as much as a sporting event. It is 'designed for television viewing' and the Games are constructed in such a way to make it 'the best possible television programme' (Panagiotopoulou 2010, 233). These observations show

how the IOC accommodates and prioritises media attention, changing its own practices, behaviours and principles to comply with the needs of television (Dayan and Katz 1992) and now, increasingly, social media. It is in the IOC's interests to do so: the organisation earned €2.55 billion in broadcast revenue during the 16 days of the 2016 Rio Olympics (International Olympic Committee 2020). We also see how the IOC has actively courted media attention in Marshall et al.'s (2010) examination of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. They discuss the 'transformation of the Olympic spectacle' (263) as new media forms became more regular partners in its production, distribution and exhibition. They emphasise how the Olympics is a prime example of mediatization because it has been transformed from a sporting event into an 'elaborate media spectacle' (263). In their study, they discuss the difficult transition which the IOC faced as the Olympics moved towards an era of increasing social media coverage.

The Olympics' dependency on television continued at the 2008 Beijing Olympics but it presented challenges as the media landscape continued to fragment. The IOC attempted to maintain control in this 'new layered media matrix' (Marshall et al. 2010, 274). Their study shows that the Olympics represents a mega-event where 'controlled experimentation of media consumption' (275) is possible. However, their research highlights the key topic of control in terms of the IOC. What they describe as a 'rupture in this system of control' (275) emphasises how changing media technologies can empower journalists. In an ever-evolving media landscape, the IOC has more control in terms of the production of its own content, and less control over the ability of independent media producers to provide coverage of the Olympics which strays from a strictly positive narrative. Building on this, Shi and Zhang (2022) more recently discussed mediatization and public reception of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics. They employed a mixed-methods approach, analysing social media posts on WeChat and conducting qualitative interviews with staff from the 2022 Beijing Olympics Organising Committee. They found that due to the impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic the Chinese public was 'thoroughly immersed in the tech-savvy Olympics scenario' (951). Their study highlights how the 2022 Beijing Games created a heightened dependency on media consumption due to restraints enforced by the Pandemic. These findings emphasise Jansson's (2018) argument that media products become 'increasingly indispensable' (4) to citizen's lives. This study therefore underlines the important role of media producers such as journalists, who task themselves with a responsibility to provide factual information because

audiences are isolated from events. Shi and Zhang (2022) also show how journalists from different countries, with different cultural norms and media landscapes provide media coverage of an international event. They point to the 'culturally specific mediatized experience of a sports mega-event' (969) in terms of how the IOC manages journalists from a range of different countries.

Other studies have used mediatization as a theoretical framework to examine the Olympics, but provide limited insights. Ličen, Antunovic and Bartoluci (2022) examine mediatization of the Games in Croatia and Slovenia. Noting the impact of mediatization specifically on the IOC, they state that: 'The digital mediatization of the Olympics entails not just a proliferation of platforms, but institutional changes that contest the values of sport and shape the relationship between the IOC and nation states' (932). They warn that mediatization scholars must be attentive to how 'particular political, social, and cultural conditions structure the process' (932). They draw closer attention to the role of sports organisations in the mediatization process at the Olympics, raising important questions: 'How do media organisations reorganize and what do they publish in response to content produced by mediatized (sport) organisations?' In this sense, they speculate on how the IOC might alter its communicative behaviour and practices in response to the demands, practices and needs of journalists, but suggest that further research is required (Ličen et al. 2022, 934).

Burdsey, Michelini and Agergaard's (2023) analysis of institutionalised mediatization of the Refugee Olympic Team at the 2020 Games in Tokyo adds to this topic. In their study, they use critical discourse analysis to examine online articles about the Refugee Team published on the IOC's website. Their study shows how the 'rhetoric of a powerful sport organization' influences socio-political attitudes towards refugees' (Burdsey et al. 2023, 1,122). Unlike other studies in this area, they illustrate how the IOC attempts to enhance its brand, image and reputation through the production of in-house content about the Refugee Olympic Team, which the IOC first created ahead of the 2016 Olympics. This study provides a limited, but notable focus on the IOC's role in mediatization by using media content produced by the organisation as its data source. A limitation of this research, however, is that it does not incorporate the IOC's relationship with *external* media in the form of sports journalists. Their findings adeptly draw attention to how the IOC 'disseminates an *official* discourse' (1,121). In their view, the IOC successfully utilises in-house content in a strongly authoritarian way. It does this as a means of 'self representation and positive

image creation' (Burdsey et al. 2023 1,122) which ultimately helps the organisation to reinforce its hegemonic position.

Each of these studies draws attention to the proactive ways in which the Olympic Games has been mediatized. It has been transformed from a mere sporting competition into a global sports mega-event thanks to its ongoing and historic incorporation of different media (Marshall et al. 2010). This small body of research provides some notable insights into the role of the IOC and sports journalists. These insights allude to the production of in-house content by the IOC, the role of television and the responsibility of journalists providing information during an Olympics held amidst a global pandemic. However, the explicit focus of studies on the mediatization of the Olympics has not been on the IOC or sports journalists. Similarly, no previous study in this area has paid attention to the ways in which defensive mediatization has been present at the Olympics. Findings have dealt with the proactive ways in which the Olympics has attracted and grown media attention, ignoring strategies which aim to reduce media spotlight and impede the work of journalists. This is unsurprising according to Nölleke et al. (2021), who state that the majority of mediatization research has tended to focus on the proactive ways that individuals and organisations accommodate media attention and encourage more coverage. This has evidently been the case with regards to mediatization research on the Olympics until now, leaving research gaps which illustrate the presence of defensive mediatization and its impact on sports journalists.

Studies which focus on the mediatization of sports organisations are particularly limited in number. Frandsen (2016; 2020) has previously explored the transformative impact of digital media on sports organisations. Adopting an institutionalist approach, she notes that digital media represent a significant concern for many sports organisations and suggests a new wave of mediatization is emerging (Frandsen 2016). Within sports organisations, mediatization occurs across many levels and at different speeds. Her study suggests sports organisations have struggled with the integration of new digital media. Smaller sports organisations, in particular, find themselves distributing communication tasks to different staff employees and volunteers, which results in confusion and complexity. This is not necessarily the case at larger sports organisations, however, who can afford to spend vast sums on expanding their media teams and communication resources (Frandsen 2016). This means hiring staff with relevant communications and journalism education and training. What these organisations share in common regardless of size is the impact of 'other

relevant and powerful institutional partners' that need to be considered in the mediatization process (2016, 385). Considering the role of journalists, Frandsen (2020) later adds that in the modern digital era 'we see a more complex relationship with the media, involving a wider set of motivations behind sports organisations' engagement' (81). She describes the relationship between sports organisations and media as 'historically contingent, depending on social cultural context' arguing that media and sport systems 'vary among nations to the extent of commercialization, professionalization, power of media and other institutional logics' (81). She suggests further empirical studies to determine this power balance and recommends more research which investigates mediatization at other sports organisations. This small body of research which applies mediatization to sports organisations also shows the merits of adopting an institutionalist approach, instead of media logic. Institutions and organisations are 'different, but related' (Frandsen 2020, 169) with the former being described as 'supraorganisational patterns of activity' (Thornton et al. 2012, 101) that are led by a central logic which guides the behaviour of organisations and individuals. According to Frandsen, adopting institutional logic is suitable because it '[emphasizes] that we are dealing with a variety of different media and a symbiotic relationship between sports organisations and other institutions' (169).

There are a number of research gaps in the mediatization of sport. This is partly due to the late adoption of mediatization by sports scholars. Frandsen (2023) notes that the small body of English-language publications that focus on the mediatization of sport 'largely reflect and maintain existing biases' (49). Focus has primarily centred on men's sport in the USA and Europe, traditionally popular professional sports such as football, and commercial sports mega-events. Smaller sports such as skiing, badminton and volleyball have received some attention. However, broader areas including women's sport, grassroots sport and sports organisations have been highlighted as significant gaps which require further attention. Frandsen (2023) notes that more in-depth case studies which are historically oriented are necessary, as well as studies which document the integration of mediated communications at sporting institutions. This is because 'their integration and use in organisational structures are informed by historically rooted practices, aims, and distinct values' (Frandsen 2023, 50). Further research on sports organisations must focus on the affordances of digital media (Hutchby 2001) and *'which* patterns of social interaction become more dominant than others and *how* they are spelled out' (Hjarvard 2014, 131). Notably, Frandsen

(2023) also argues that while most sports are united in conforming to internationally-recognised rules of play, nations are distinct because some are less homogenised by the cultural processes of commercialisation and professionalisation 'which have been distinct elements in the mediatization process' (50-51). This point requires further exploration in the context of the differing levels of professionalism of sports journalists (as a profession and an industry) across different countries. New knowledge which investigates the relationship between sports journalists and sports organisations can therefore contribute towards a deeper understanding of the structural changes and complexities involved in this brand new wave of mediatization (Couldry and Hepp 2017). As summarised by Frandsen (2023): 'Digitisation affects everyone, and it saturates the everyday practices of sports journalists' (51).

(iv) Defensive Mediatization

In the last section of this literature review I discuss the specific aspect of mediatization which is the central focus of this study, which is defensive mediatization. Nölleke, Scheu and Birkner, (2021) provide a conceptual framework which I seek to build on. They define defensive mediatization as strategies deployed by actors which 'try to avoid media publicity' (737). This means that an individual, or organisation, employs strategic tactics to prevent focus and deflect attention away from their actions. Defensive mediatization is enforced on journalists and media organisations in an attempt to keep them away and avoid negative coverage. The central motivation behind defensive mediatization is to uphold and preserve an individual or organisation's reputation, brand and image. It seeks to exert control over media coverage to reinforce and extend existing power structures. Often, this control is enforced through a passive lack of engagement. Other times it is through proactive tactics which prevent journalists from reporting and publishing stories.

Defensive mediatization is a new and emerging concept within the field, but it requires more empirical evidence and illustrative examples. It offers a new perspective on existing mediatization research, which until now has primarily focused on different ways actors seek to gain media attention in proactive ways (Elmelund-Præstekær et al. 2011; Peleg and Bogoch, 2012; Marcinkowski et al. 2014). Defensive mediatization has recently been adopted to analyse how wealthy people strategically avoid publicity (Kantola and Juho 2023) and to understand sports

journalists' perspectives on why these strategies are deployed on them (O'Boyle and Gallagher 2023). In their study, Kantola and Juho (2023) highlight the different ways that Finland's wealthiest people deflect from journalists and 'try to avoid public criticism and alerting political opponents' (53). They argue that this represents a paradox: 'The media's growing powers lead to an increasing *avoidance* of the media' (53). Their study shows how the media's growing influence in society, on institutions and culture, can result in individuals and organisations limiting their media engagements. Finland's elite avoid journalists because they 'perceive the media as biased and threatening' (52) and because wealthy heirs and entrepreneurs are confident that regardless of media engagement, they will have their voices heard by policymakers anyway. Their findings align with O'Boyle and Gallagher (2023) who assert that sports organisations also actively avoid journalists due to distrust and a fear of negative coverage. This results in athletes and officials at sports organisations being much more 'careful in what they say' and 'corporate in how they speak' (O'Boyle and Gallagher 2023, 670). This is partly fuelled by a fear of journalists and a feeling of suspicion towards them. This outlook is driven by negative experiences with members of the media caused by stories which sports figures viewed as potentially libellous and defamatory.

Küpper (2024) concurs with these findings about athletes and sports officials fearing journalists. They adopted defensive mediatization as a conceptual framework to analyse how tennis star Naomi Osaka declined to take part in press conferences during the 2021 French Open. Osaka's decision to bypass her media duties and refuse interviews 'triggered a sports-related metajournalistic discourse' (1). It was a high-profile example where a prominent sports celebrity chose to ignore journalists due to the adverse psychological impact of speaking with the media on Osaka's mental health. As a result, their study offers evidence to elucidate why sports stars actively and strategically ignore the demands and needs of sports journalists and the resulting consequences: 'For journalists, they must continue to renegotiate their role' (Küpper 2024, 17). A limitation of their content analysis, however, is its lack of direct insight provided by journalists on this topic. Küpper implores future research on defensive mediatization to incorporate qualitative data: 'Interviews with journalists and in sports editorial offices can undoubtedly provide more profound insights into the decision making processes within institutions' (17).

Returning to Nölleke et al.'s (2021) guide, which acts as the framework for this study's analysis in Chapter 5, they explain that defensive mediatization strategies exist 'on a continuum' (744).

Therefore, they employ a system of categorising these different strategies across the macro level of social structures, the meso level of institutions, and the micro level of individual actors (Meyen et al. 2014). Changes at the macro level mean internal structures at an organisation which guide decision-making. Changes at the meso level concern institutional structures, such as regulations and hierarchies. Lastly, changes at the micro level relate to professional roles and the conduct and behaviour of specific individuals. This is a highly useful framework which allows the careful categorisation of specific defensive mediatization tactics to inhibit journalists.

In this sense, defensive mediatization is an innovative new framework which helps expand our understanding of mediatization more broadly. It offers a more nuanced view of the theory, highlighting how organisations apply proactive and defensive media strategies in tandem. As stated by Nölleke et al. (2021): 'Mediatization does not necessarily mean social actors willingly submit to media demands to achieve media publicity, [it] describes the management of media attention according to a system's strategic objectives which entails defensive strategies' (751). This shows how mediatization is never simply a one-way process of accommodation. Often it is more beneficial for an organisation to avoid media spotlight and defensive mediatization elucidates the processes involved in limiting media engagements, the motivations behind these tactics and their consequences for journalists. Although a new and emerging theory, defensive mediatization is particularly well-suited for this study which seeks to analyse the relationship between the IOC and sports journalists. Defensive mediatization offers an intriguing framework to view their interactions and can offer an explanation for the deterioration in relations between sports journalists and the organisations they cover in recent years, as will be discussed in the next chapter. The limited number of studies discussed in this section which have used it as a conceptual framework highlight its effectiveness, but also illustrate a pressing need for more empirical research.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has presented a comprehensive analysis of the existing literature which forms the basis of this study. Its purpose was to critically assess previous scholarship in the three key areas which this study contributes towards: sports communication, Olympic studies and mediatization. The objective of this approach was to highlight research gaps in these three fields, thereby

positioning my study at the intersection. Sports communication has developed into a respected and distinct discipline in recent decades. Sports journalism represents a prominent focus in this field as scholars grapple with concerns about the profession's practices, challenges, its identity and future viability. By focusing on the specific subject of Olympic journalism, which has been neglected, this study provides more unique and focused insights which can subsequently contribute to a broader discussion about the mediatization of sports journalism.

Olympic studies is also now recognised as its own distinct, multidisciplinary field which attracts the attention of scholars from a range of research backgrounds. Previous studies have documented the IOC's formulation, history, its mission and objectives. The IOC's unique role as a non-governmental governing body has also received focus, as well as work analysing the Olympic Movement's purpose. Official IOC documents, such as the Olympic Charter and IOC media guidelines, define the boundaries of its relationship with journalists. While there is a significant amount of media research about the Games, limitations include a lack of qualitative interview-based studies, an absence of in-depth media research about the IOC as a sports organisation, and a dearth of research which examines the impactful role of journalists. Indeed, Horky and Budiasa (2024) explicitly suggest future Olympic research should analyse the Games 'more intensively in the sense of profound (deep) mediatization and defensive mediatization strategies of the protagonists.'

Given the substantial role played by journalists providing in-depth coverage of the Olympic Games for over a century, the absence of research which explores their impact on shaping the event into a cultural phenomenon is significant. However, there are several reasons for this research gap which need to be emphasised at the end of this chapter. Firstly, the elevated focus of sports scholars on Olympic athletes and the mega-event's socio-economic and cultural impact underscores how the media is often viewed as a conduit for these stories, rather than a subject in its own right. The global spectacle of the Olympics and its influence on politics, national identity, diplomacy and economic affairs often overshadows the contributions and experiences of journalists. Secondly, the absence of research into journalists emphasises their perception as a secondary actor in the Olympic spectacle. They are very often viewed as outside 'intermediaries' (Boyle 2013, 92), instead of active participants who shape the narratives of the Olympics. Because of this, other

stakeholders such as fans, sponsors and athletes have been given more focus for academic inquiry, with less interest in the practices and experiences of Olympic journalists.

Finally, the absence of research into journalists' relationship with the IOC pinpoints a practical challenge in the pursuit of this research, which is access. While sports journalists are struggling with diminishing levels of access, this difficulty has been experienced by scholars too. Obtaining access to elicit the knowledge, insights and experiences of those working in media is often a constraint (Meyers and Davidson 2017). These barriers have led sports media scholars to rely on alternative data-gathering methods, such as quantitatively analysing Olympic media content, instead of directly interviewing media producers to understand their practices (Geurin and Naraine 2020). Likewise, the absence of literature into the IOC's communications strategies emphasises the insular, guarded nature of large global organisations and their frequent unwillingness to speak about their internal structures and policies (Busacca 2023). A lack of transparency and a reluctance to share internal information is a constraint for researchers seeking to uncover new knowledge about protective and confidential organisations. Conducting in-depth, qualitative research into these parties requires significant time, resources and the ability to overcome the barrier of limited access. These challenges provide context into why the study of the Olympic Games has largely ignored the experiences of journalists. While the research gap illustrated throughout this chapter is significant, the reasons outlined provide valuable insight into the underlying factors contributing to its existence. This underscores the importance of alleviating this gap with new knowledge. As will be discussed in the next chapter, it also emphasises the importance of devising a research design which can successfully gather, analyse and contextualise these closely-guarded insights.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the methodological approach employed in this study. It details the qualitative research strategy which was adopted, outlines the selection criteria of participants interviewed and discusses ethical considerations in the research process. In this chapter I describe the process of analysing interview data through Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six-step framework for Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) using NVivo. This chapter outlines my use of Nölleke, Scheu, and Birkner's (2021) existing framework for defensive mediatization as the foundation for the study's empirical findings. A detailed description is provided to explain how data obtained via one-on-one interviews was coded, analysed and carefully categorised according to this existing framework. This approach contributes new empirical evidence towards defensive mediatization.

This chapter also serves to explain its use of in-depth qualitative interviews and the value of this approach. According to Walliman (2001, 238), one-on-one interviews are the most effective method of gathering qualitative data, or the 'gold standard', per Barbour (2008, 113). This chapter provides a breakdown of how participants were selected based on their professional credentials, the process involved in conducting interviews and overcoming challenges encountered. Criteria for participants include their job title, how many Olympic Games they covered, knowledge of IOC affairs, level of professional experience and the organisation they work for. Notably, this chapter contains my reflections on what Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) describe as 'the moral integrity of the researcher' (34). As a practitioner of sports journalism, I am in a unique position which raises important ethical considerations. These concern the interpretation of the study's findings and my relationship with participants, some of whom are former media colleagues. This raises discussions about potential bias caused by practitioners conducting research in their own industry (Ragin 1994; Halloran 1998). I conclude by discussing limitations of the study's approach, notably a lack of gender balance and the study's exclusive focus on Olympic journalists. Ultimately, this chapter's purpose is to elucidate the rationale taken in constructing this study's design and the motivations which informed these choices.

3.2 Research strategy

This qualitative study uses 50 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with sports journalists, International Olympic Committee (IOC) communications professionals and Olympic media experts. I sought sources with direct experience, knowledgeable opinions and sufficient professional credentials about the IOC and the Olympic Movement. This corresponds to Ragin's (1994) description of qualitative research design: 'A plan for collecting and analysing evidence that will make it possible for the investigator to answer questions he or she has posed' (191). In this regard, my research design was devised to be the most effective approach for precisely addressing the study's research questions, which are:

Central Research Question: How have Olympic journalists' professional identities and working conditions evolved in response to the IOC's communications strategies over time?

Sub-research questions:

- How do Olympic journalists define their professional identity and how has this changed over time?
- What defensive mediatization strategies has the IOC employed in its interactions with journalists?
- What motivates the IOC to implement these strategies and have these motivations shifted?
- What impact have these mediatization strategies had on the professional practices and autonomy of Olympic journalists?

My research is a response to the challenges and concerns which afflict sports journalism where many practitioners currently worry about diminishing autonomy over their own profession (Weedon et al. 2018). This research design is structured to address the difficulties afflicting sports journalists by obtaining their informed, expert insights via a careful process of in-depth qualitative interviews and subsequent critical examination via Reflexive Thematic Analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. This builds on the work of other sports media scholars who have highlighted how sports journalism is perceived as a precarious profession with an uncertain future (Daum and Scherer 2018; Gentile et al. 2022; Rojas-Torrijos and Nölleke 2023). Similarly, by

conducting interviews with officials at the IOC this study provides a more comprehensive insight into the communications strategies employed by a powerful but closely-guarded global sports organisation.

This study's research strategy was influenced by my own strengths as a researcher (Cresswell 1998, 2003). This concerns my ability to identify the individuals who possess the requisite knowledge to answer my research questions, and devising the most appropriate method to elicit, analyse and present their responses (Deacon 2007). My research approach involved speaking with sports journalists, IOC officials and Olympic experts so they could provide a nuanced understanding of the relationship between the two parties. According to Hansen and Machin (2013), open-ended, in-depth interviews offer the best opportunity to obtain personal accounts of behaviours and opinions from individuals with direct, frontline experiences. My purpose for using in-depth interviews aligns with Priest's (2010a) assertion that they precisely capture someone else's point of view. A researcher 'allows conclusions to emerge from the data, capturing those conclusions in a written product that makes them vivid and convincing' (2010, 95-96).

In-depth interviews were also selected as the basis for this study given their effectiveness which has been demonstrated in other recent sports journalism research (McEnnis 2016; Sherwood et al. 2017; Flindall and Wassong 2017; Robertson 2024) and mediatization studies specific to sport (Borges 2019; Frandsen and Landgrebe 2022). In particular, Flindall and Wassong (2017) and Robertson (2024) directly interviewed a series of Olympic journalists in studies which explore their professional ideology and working practices. There is significant value in systematically analysing journalists to document their characteristics, backgrounds, attitudes, beliefs and perceptions (Weaver and Loffenholz 2008). However, rather than simply providing a descriptive overview of Olympic journalists' experiences, my study compares and contrasts them with officials at the IOC in the context of defensive mediatization. In this instance, I define defensive mediatization as occasions when organisations 'protect established structures and practices against media demands' (Nölleke et al. 2021, 738). Incorporating Nölleke et al.'s (2021) framework for defensive mediatization and interviewing both Olympic journalists and IOC officials was the most effective method to firstly categorise these strategies, secondly understand their impact on

journalists, and thirdly explain why they are applied by the IOC. This approach is directly aligned with the research questions outlined above.

This study's design was constructed to gain a deeper understanding of the IOC's relationship with sports journalists. Through the process of early interviews, defensive mediatization emerged as a suitable and accurate theoretical framework to explain their dynamic. In this way, after early pilot interviews helped develop initial themes, patterns and discussion points, examining the presence and impact of defensive mediatization at the IOC became this study's central focus in terms of research design. This theoretical construct gave my study more focus and scope. As noted by Flick (2018), a key feature of effective qualitative research design is its potential for limiting the specific focus of the planned study. Flick explains that a successful qualitative research design has an explicit focus, is centred around a clear research question, is linked to theoretical background, and is manageable in resources and time (45). In this way, my research design is built on a number of foundations. Firstly, it is grounded in the credibility of my sources given their knowledge and experience. Second, it possesses a sound theoretical basis in defensive mediatization. Finally, this study is built on the strength of its data-gathering approach of in-depth interviews given its success in similar sports mediatization studies (Borges 2019; Frandsen and Landgrebe 2022).

3.3 Criteria for selecting Olympic journalists to interview

At the outset, it is essential to establish a clear conceptualisation of the term 'Olympic journalist' and to articulate the criteria for their inclusion and exclusion in this study. Before providing a more substantial description of the 50 participants who were interviewed in this study in the next section of this chapter, here I will firstly reflect upon the breadth of roles which fit under the term of Olympic journalist, for example, ex-athletes in mixed zones asking questions, broadcast rights holders, or reporters covering the IOC's governance. While previous scholars have varied on an exact definition of an Olympic journalist (Flindall and Wassong 2017; Robertson 2024), it remains imperative to reflect upon who labels themselves as such and who is allowed to characterize themselves as an Olympic journalist. As such, this section aims to provide a logical discussion about which characteristics, professional training, qualifications, employer and platform allows us to consider an individual as an Olympic journalist in this study.

In her examination of Olympic reporters who covered the 2020 Tokyo Games, Robertson (2024) outlines her criteria for participants. She interviewed media professionals who covered the 2020 Tokyo Games, worked for major English-language outlets and produced work which had a 'problem-orientation' (Robertson 2024, 6). She expands on this final criteria by describing this type of media coverage as covering 'social, political, and ethical matters, in terms of holding powerful actors accountable, or through a commitment to seeking out marginalized perspectives and counternarratives' (12). Beyond these choices, Roberson does not provide any greater detail on who she considers as an Olympic journalist, resisting the need to reflect on whether IOC press accreditation is a necessity and whether working for a host broadcaster is a limitation to impartiality. Likewise, in their study of Olympic journalists and how they reflect on their professional identity, Flindall and Wassong (2017) do not provide a concrete definition of who they consider an Olympic journalist to be either. Their study interviewed what they describe as 'male opinion-forming sports journalists' and that 'nationalities were selected because each country [of the journalist being interviewed] had been associated with the Olympic Games, either through hosting or bidding to host' (Flindall and Wassong 2017, 121). Again, their study fails to adequately provide a description or a reflection upon what specific criteria constitutes who an Olympic journalist is. Previous literature in this field rests upon a straightforward, but overly simplistic, assumption that a journalist providing coverage of Olympic topics can be considered a qualified, professional, authoritative Olympic journalist.

In my study, I consider an Olympic journalist to be an individual whose job is providing media coverage of the Olympic Games, both from a sporting and political frame, but must do so in a paid professional capacity for a reputable publication, whether in print, online, or for broadcast television and radio. This means that these individuals have received professional training to work as journalists, have educational qualifications in this area, and receive payment for their work. This final point is necessary to stress as payment differentiates between voluntary, citizen journalism, and journalism which forms part of an individual's livelihood (Miah, García and Zhihui 2008). Payment indicates a professional occupation and it carries extra responsibilities and obligations as a result. There are an abundance of casual, part-time and voluntary media members who cover the Olympics (Brown et al. 2019; Devlin et al. 2020). However this study concerns those individuals

whose role covering the Games and the IOC is their professional occupation, either on a full-time contract, or on a freelance basis for multiple publications. It is also key to note that in this study freelance Olympic journalists are not considered in a lesser capacity than those on full-time contracts. As will be discussed later, fragmentation and rising precariousness within today's sports media ecosystem has resulted in a rise in freelance sports journalists. This fact does not indicate that the work produced by freelancers is of a lesser quality or significance, it merely reflects an increasingly precarious employment situation for Olympic journalists today, where full-time staff positions are less available than before (Marín-Sanchiz et al. 2023).

The IOC plays a significant role in how we categorise who an Olympic journalist is. They are the organisation which can grant, or very often deny, official press credentials. This fact raises important issues: can an individual label themselves as an Olympic journalist if they have not received official press accreditation from the IOC to attend the Games in person? Should Olympic journalists be recognised as only those media members who the IOC grants access to, or are true Olympic journalists the individuals who cover the Games from the outside looking in? These are paramount issues to consider when attempting to define who an Olympic journalist is because it directly confronts fundamental guiding principles of journalism as a profession and its watchdog role. On the one hand, Olympic journalists rely on the IOC to provide them with access, yet journalists also have a responsibility to hold the IOC accountable for its decisions, its governance and its staging of the Games (Jennings 2011). For the purposes of this study, labelling one group of journalists as more legitimate than others based on whether they have obtained official IOC press accreditation is not the defining factor. What matters in this context is acknowledging how both journalists on the inside at the Olympics, and those reporting from the fringes, play a significant role.

Both officially accredited journalists and those who have not received these credentials from the IOC produce important media coverage and both groups have limitations which must be highlighted. Receiving official IOC press accreditation means these journalists must behave and act according to guidelines and codes of conduct (International Olympic Committee 2024). Breaking these codes of conduct, or producing content which could be interpreted by the IOC as unethical or libellous, can result in these journalists having their credentials for Olympic venues

and press conferences revoked. These facts demonstrate that journalists who are IOC-accredited have limitations and restraints placed on them in their roles. This constitutes a trade-off: agreeing to these IOC codes of conduct allows such journalists exclusive insider access to Olympic venues and to interview officials and IOC figures in return. As such, journalists reporting from the outside who have not been granted IOC press passes to cover the Games officially, have the significant limitation of not having this internal access to the Games. They cannot provide the same depth of insight into the Olympics, but in return possess more freedom and autonomy to be critical in their coverage (Robertson 2024). These journalists do not operate with a fear of being cut off because their coverage is not dependent on insider access. For these reasons, in this study I acknowledge the important, contrasting role of both these groups of journalists and view them both as qualified Olympic journalists regardless of their status as IOC-accredited or not.

This line of differentiation is also relevant when we consider journalists who work for rights-holding media companies. Participants in this study who work for international broadcasters, for example the BBC in the UK or NBC in the United States, are constrained because their employers have paid the IOC to broadcast the Olympics. Doing so means that rights-holding journalists are perceived as less likely to be critical of the Games and how it has been organised. As argued by Robertson (2024), such journalists are 'more likely to be invested in maintaining the five-ring machine' (11). Controversial topics consistently arise throughout the duration of an Olympics, such as doping accusations, refereeing controversies, and corruption allegations (Rowe 2000). Rights-holding Olympic journalists must be more careful and restrained in their coverage of these subjects and controversies. While working for a rights-holding media company does not automatically imply that journalists will be more sympathetic to the IOC and its staging of the Games, there is still an unspoken element of potential bias in these cases. In this context, broadcast journalists who report for non-rights holding media entities are viewed as more independent in their work. They have more autonomy to be critical of the Games and the IOC because they and their employers have not paid significant amounts of money to broadcast the events (Buchmeier 2022). My study considers both these types of media members as legitimate Olympic journalists because the topic they are reporting on centres on the Games and the IOC. However, it remains necessary to acknowledge the limitations of their coverage based on their position, their employer and the levels of freedom they possess in their reporting. This study bases its definition of an

Olympic journalist primarily on the subject matter of the reporter. Their coverage must centre on the Games, either from a sporting or a political and governance framing. In its conceptualisation of the Olympic journalist, this study acknowledges the significant, contrasting role played by insider journalists with heightened levels of access, and those who report from the outside and possess higher levels of freedom in their reporting. Olympic journalists are unique as they demonstrate modern journalism at the intersection of elite sports coverage, global media spectacle and institutional power. These individuals, who operate on full-time staff contracts, and in increasingly precarious freelance roles, are specialists who navigate a fraught environment shaped by the IOC, global audiences, and the expanding boundaries of digital media.

3.4 Participants interviewed

This study consisted of 50 in-depth, qualitative interviews with English-speaking sports journalists, broadcasters, IOC officials and Olympic experts (see Appendix D). Interviews were conducted between November 2022 and October 2023 with 45 men and five women. Interviews were conducted until I was satisfied that the study's research questions had been sufficiently addressed. Interviews ceased at the point where thematic repetition became evident (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey 2011). Because this study concerns the relationship between two key parties — the IOC and sports journalists — professionals who currently work, previously worked, or worked in partnership with the IOC were identified as central to the analysis. Sports journalists who cover the IOC and the Olympics, or did so in the past, formed the other core group of interviewees. 26 sports journalists, 16 IOC officials and a small group of eight additional participants were interviewed. These additional participants include retired Olympic athletes, consultants and media managers at different Olympic organisations, such as National Olympic Committees (NOCs). For example, the Director of Communications for the British Olympic Committee was interviewed, as was the media manager for the European Olympic Committee (EOC). These individuals have extensive knowledge of Olympic affairs. Complementary interviews contribute important context and background information (Harding 2018). Supplementary data represents the 'flexibility and adaptability' (Robson 2011, 280) of interviewing as a data-gathering method, as it allows researchers to fill in gaps. These Olympic experts are key intermediaries in the complex Olympic system which connects individual countries, members of its media and the IOC. These individuals

facilitate and support journalists attending the Olympic Games in conjunction with the IOC in terms of obtaining media credentials.

In the first group of participants, I interviewed individuals who currently work at the IOC, or previously worked for the organisation. These 16 individuals each work (or worked) in a capacity where interacting with journalists, monitoring media coverage, conducting press conferences, organising mixed zones and staging Olympic media events are core duties. They respond to journalists' emails and requests, produce newsletters, issue press releases and act as spokesmen for the IOC. Duties also include facilitating interviews, managing Olympic social media accounts and drafting media guidelines. Participants ranged in their positions and seniority. They included media directors, heads of marketing, IOC communications managers, spokesmen and press officers. I chose to interview both current and former IOC officials to show how the organisation's relationship with sports journalists has evolved. The oldest interviewee first worked for the IOC in the 1980s. The most recent interviewees currently work there today. This approach allowed me to contrast the IOC's level of access, cordiality, animosity and professionalism with sports journalists. Past employees have more liberty to express opinions about their experiences because they do not have the same risk of repercussions. As noted by Alteri and Dooley (1992): 'Former employees often possess relevant information concerning the practices, conduct, knowledge and intendment of their former employer' (529). Issues such as loyalty and economic and emotional ties to an organisation are less important to these individuals. Current IOC officials were naturally less inclined to be critical of the organisation during interviews. The addition of former employees to the sample therefore formulated a fuller, historic overview of the IOC. Participants from the IOC worked across the organisation's communications, media relations, digital marketing, public relations and social media departments (see Figure 3). Questions focussed on their interactions with journalists, the production of in-house content and media coverage of the IOC. Participants were asked about strategies used for interacting with journalists. These responses were later categorised according to Nölleke et al.'s (2021) framework for defensive mediatization.
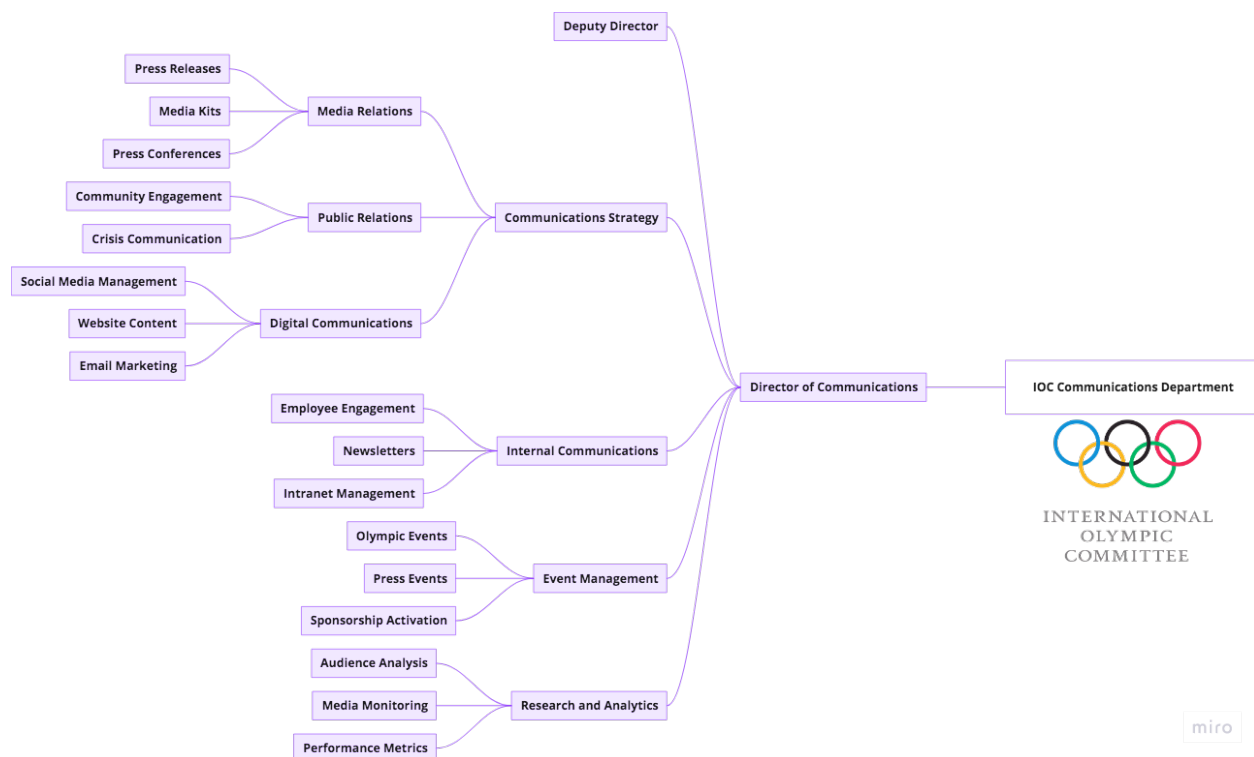
Figure 3: Organisational structure and tasks of the IOC's communications department.

The second group of participants were sports journalists. Participants were selected on the basis that their reporting is focused primarily on the IOC, Olympic sports, and that they have reported on at least three editions of the Olympic Games in their careers. These 26 individuals worked across different platforms, including written and online publications (see Appendix C), as radio commentators and television broadcasters. They were chosen on the basis of their position at their publication. An emphasis was placed on senior, experienced journalists. Sports journalists held job titles such as Chief Sports Writer, Olympic Correspondent and Sports Editor. They worked across a range of media entities and publications which include: The Guardian, The BBC, The New York Times, Sports Illustrated, The Athletic, The Washington Post, The Los Angeles Times, ARD Germany, RTÉ Sport, The Daily Telegraph, The Evening Standard, NBC Sports, USA Today, CNN, The Irish Independent, The Associated Press, Virgin Media, SportsJOE, The Irish Times, Reuters, The Times UK and ESPN. Journalists who work for Olympic-focused websites were also interviewed. These websites, which are the leading Olympic-specific outlets that report solely on the IOC and the Olympic Movement, include *InsideTheGames*, *Around the Rings*, *3 Wires Sport* and *GamesBids.com*. With regards to nationality, this study primarily interviewed sports

journalists based in Europe and the United States. Their work is predominantly published in English-speaking publications. This study incorporates interviews with individuals from a number of countries. These include Ireland, England, Scotland, the United States, Australia, Canada, Germany, Belgium, Iceland, Italy and Switzerland. Due to the global nature of the Olympic Games, it was imperative to feature a range of international voices. Interviewees ranged in age from late-20s to late-60s, giving this study a comprehensive timeline of recent Olympic Games. The oldest sports journalist reported on the IOC at the 1976 Montreal Olympics, while numerous participants covered the 2024 Summer Olympics and the most recent 142nd IOC Session held in Paris.

3.5 Limitations of sample and constraints of interviewing

There are implications to consider given that participants in this study were primarily male and because the sample of interviewees was limited to one geographical region, which can be identified as the Global North. Firstly, while the fact that only 10% of participants were female is reflective of a male-dominated sports media industry (Boczek et al. 2023) and speaks to the unbalanced hierarchy of many sports organisations including the IOC (Chambers et al. 2004; Hardin 2013; Schoch 2013; Whiteside 2013), it is key to reflect on the consequences of interviewee responses in this context. The sample of participants means that a male-dominated lens impacts findings. The dynamics and issues discussed, such as gender equity, safeguarding and coverage of female athletes at the Olympics, may have been given less prevalence by male respondents in their answers. It is essential to highlight this constraint particularly when discussing the Olympic Games which, as argued by Dashper (2018), '[offers] a rare opportunity for women in sport to receive broad media interest, with higher levels of attention by journalists during this media event' (1,739).

There has been ample evidence documenting the setbacks and failures of media coverage provided to women's sport during the Olympics. These include gender marking (Brooks 2002; Hallmark 2006), infantilising (Fuller 2006; Fink 2015), sexualisation (Cooky, Messner and Musto 2015) and heteronormativity (Sailors, Teetzel and Weaving 2012; Eagleman 2015). While the Olympic Games is an opportunity to give heightened attention towards women's sport on a global stage, Decipher (2018) argues that coverage of female Olympians 'continues to be framed by narrow

heteronormative ideals of acceptable sporting femininity, tied into notions of friendliness, grace and approachability' (1,753). Therefore, the lower frequency of female voices in this study increases the likelihood that topics which directly impact their work in newsrooms and relate to their lived experiences working in Olympic sport may be overlooked (Antunovic 2019). It is important to acknowledge these missing perspectives because the reduced presence of female voices limits the scope of this study's findings and may exclude meaningful insights into media practice, newsroom culture and coverage priorities.

Secondly, the over-reliance on English-speaking participants who come from Europe and North America must also be acknowledged because it contributes to a marginalisation of voices from the Global South. As argued by Clarington et al. (2004): 'The low percentage of minority sport journalists suggests dynamics of exclusion' (709). A high degree of the best resourced media institutions which cover the Olympics and enjoy the highest access to insiders at the Olympic Movement are concentrated in the Global North. Likewise, the IOC and its staff are based in Lausanne, Switzerland. However, these facts do not take away from the ramifications of exclusion which occur when participant samples skew too heavily towards one geographical region. Norms around journalistic professionalism, values, ethics, objectivity and media framing vary widely from different countries (Hanitzsch et al. 2019; Peruško et al. 2020; Meier 2024) and Olympic journalists from the Global South face unique constraints such as increased levels of censorship, limited access and resource scarcity (Weaver and Willnat 2012) which shape their coverage of the Games in distinct ways.

Sources in this study were chosen due to the researcher's network of contacts, which skews towards Olympic officials and journalists based in Europe and the United States. However, these facts should not evade the important consideration of systematic underrepresentation of Global South journalists in Olympic media spaces. Findings from this study should be interpreted with these limitations in mind, acknowledging implications in terms of journalist–source power dynamics, challenges in accreditation and access, and alternative norms of journalism. Additionally, issues such as constraints on press freedom, economic and resource inequalities in sports media, language and translation barriers in Olympic communication and varying host country experiences of the Games differ significantly depending on geographical location.

Reflecting upon this study's data collection method, a limitation of conducting interviews with journalists is the tendency for these individuals to offer one-sided narratives of their careers with minimal intrusion (Smulyan 2004). While journalists are adept storytellers, it is imperative to acknowledge what Meyers & Davidson (2017) describe as the 'narrative choices they made as they [construct] their accounts' (279). This is especially pertinent when interviewing Olympic journalists, with previous studies acknowledging a tendency among journalists to exaggerate the positive aspects of their profession decades ago (Usher 2010; Karakaya and Manning 2022) compared to more difficult present-day conditions. Answers from participants must be guarded against this exaggerated sense of nostalgia which glamorises journalism from a golden era that did not always exist (Suggs 2015). This point links to an ongoing tension between journalism scholars and practising journalists. As summarised by Meyers and Davidson (2017): 'Journalists reject scholarly critique because it questions the journalists' self-perception as professionals… journalists often feel that researchers are condescending toward them' (282). These limitations are relevant in the context of this study due to my past experience working as a sports journalist. Journalists' answers are highly subjective and are clouded by their own career experiences, biases, values and frustrations. Likewise, journalists can 'self-censor' (Biel 2011, 16) in order to protect their reputation, or that of their employer. The political leanings, funding sources and institutional history of the media entity which they work for can also frame and influence a journalists' response to specific questions.

While many journalists strongly emphasise their independence and objectivity, these declarations cannot be accepted at face value without any scrutiny from the researcher who is interviewing them. As argued by Bodrunova et al. (2021), acknowledging a journalists' career history, past experiences and who they work for is imperative to obtain a full, accurate understanding of how they answer questions posed to them. While journalists' profession is built on values which prioritise providing truth and accuracy, it must be accounted for that individuals can still misremember information and reconstruct events (Carpenter 2018). This can occur when asking journalists about career experiences which took place many years in the past, with retrospective distortion and hindsight bias open to taking place in their recollections. Weiss (1994) explains that an 'interviewing partnership' (61) is at play between researchers and journalists. He warns that

scholars must exert caution due to journalists' familiarity with interview situations. This means being able to push back against answers and not accept all responses as factual accounts which are entirely representative of all members of the profession. These issues are highly relevant to this study, which comprises a mixture of older Olympic journalists and younger, newer media professionals. Older veteran media professionals may exaggerate and overemphasise the heightened degree of access and informality of journalism in previous decades (Ferrucci 2018), and reflect more negatively about the state of contemporary working conditions. Similarly, answers from younger interviewees must also be interpreted with caution due to their lack of industry experience (Reinardy 2011).

3.6 Data collection

Participants were recruited in a number of ways. Firstly, I utilised the network I have developed over recent years through my experience in the sports media industry. Having worked as a sports journalist for five years, I reported alongside reporters and Olympic officials who were suitable for this study. In the duration of this study I spent four months working at the European Olympic Committee (EOC) at their EU headquarters in Brussels in 2022. I later spent six months based in Washington D.C. at the *Povich Center for Sports Journalism* at the University of Maryland. These two research trips to Belgium and the United States allowed me to connect with Olympic experts and journalists. At the EOC, it also gave me the opportunity to learn about the mechanisms of the Olympic Movement from the inside. Conducting this type of observational research from inside an organisation has a number of benefits simply by paying attention to one's surroundings in a systematic way. Insights about a media organisation can be gained by observing from within. According to Priest (2010a): 'Complex organisations are characterised by powerful *informal* lines of communication and control that may be quite different from the formal hierarchy' (97). In this way, I used my experience working at the EOC to equip myself with first-hand insights about the internal dynamics at a prominent Olympic organisation.

A snowball technique was deployed in terms of recruiting participants (Priest 2010b) and I approached others through online platforms including LinkedIn, Twitter and via email. Interviews took place in-person, on Zoom and WhatsApp. Each lasted between 30 minutes and one hour.

Average interview length was 43 minutes in duration. Audio was recorded using my iPhone. MP3 files were uploaded to Google Drive immediately after each interview and were backed up on my laptop and on two external USB sticks. In-person interviews took place on campus at Dublin City University and at coffee shops in Ireland, Belgium, and the United States. In-person interviews add distinct value by enabling the observation of body language and non-verbal cues which enhances the depth of data collection (Lindlof 1995). Where participants were not in a position to meet face-to-face, Zoom and WhatsApp were used instead. This allowed me to interview a high number of expert participants without expensive travel costs (Hansen and Machin 2013). I approached each interview with a list of pre-prepared questions and talking points, but also allowed each conversation to flow naturally. By allowing each interview to develop in a conversational, back-and-forth manner, participants were more likely to relax, engage and offer more insightful answers (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey 2011).

All interviews, in person and online, were conducted in a semi-structured manner, which allows the researcher to build a rapport with participants (Harding 2018; Seidman 2019). Open-ended, semi-structured interviews provide researchers with the flexibility to interject, consciously managing the conversation with probes and follow-up questions (Roulston 2010; Donsbach and Brade 2011). Participants were asked different questions broadly centred around the same topics. These topics included the experiences of sports journalists covering the IOC, reporting on the Olympic Games as an event, the IOC's use for journalists and methods employed by the IOC to manage and limit media engagements. The individuals interviewed are highly experienced media practitioners, many of whom conduct interviews as part of their own professional duties. Journalists and media managers are highly adept at interview situations, which offered benefits and setbacks. Firstly, journalists were able to express their experiences and opinions in a highly articulate manner during interviews. Effective communication is fundamental for excelling as a journalist (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2021). However, interviewing these media professionals demonstrated how they were adept at *not* answering questions (Weaver and Löffelholz 2008). IOC media managers demonstrated a proficiency at side-stepping and deflecting questions. Some were keen to evade controversial topics, which reinforced my need to ask follow-up questions.

3.7 Analysing interview data

After completion of interviews, I undertook the process of transcribing, coding and analysing the data gathered. Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) argue that the craft of transcription is a vital aspect of qualitative research which is often underappreciated and neglected. For these authors, the process represents 'translations from an oral language to a written language, where the constructions involve a series of judgements' (106). Throughout the transcription process, I was conscious of these deliberations, using my notes from each interview to acknowledge facial expressions, tone of voice, pauses and body language from participants. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was used in order to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns from the interview data (see Figure 4). This approach emphasises the subjective role of the researcher to elicit meaning and allows a theme-based narrative to emerge after rounds of coding. In total, over 38 hours of recorded interview audio was compiled. Rather than waiting for all interviews to be completed, transcription of interviews was completed on a rolling basis. This was highly beneficial for the interview process, which began in November 2022 and was fully completed 11 months later in October 2023.

Early interviews helped to shape and guide future interviews. Knowledge gained from initial interviews informed and enhanced later conversations (Hansen and Machin 2019, 46). In this regard, I utilised the examples and opinions shared by early participants and posed these reflections to future interviewees. For example, in an early interview a sports journalist for The Irish Times complained that the IOC lacked transparency in its dealings with the media. In later interviews with IOC officials, I quoted this remark to elicit the IOC's reaction and interpretation. This technique is widely employed in qualitative journalism research (Weaver and Löffelholz 2009) as it provides an opportunity to gather multiple perspectives on the same topic. This interview process allowed initial themes to emerge, which are discussed in further detail throughout Chapter 4. For this study, I define a theme according to Braun and Clarke (2022) who state they are patterns anchored by a shared idea, meaning or concept. These themes constitute the initial, preliminary analysis of this study (Rapley 2018). I transcribed 38 interviews out of 50, while 12 interviews utilised an external transcription service which was was funded with a grant from Dublin City University. I checked all 50 transcriptions for accuracy before manually coding each interview

script, which was initially inductive (themes, codes and categories emerge from the data) and later deductive (themes, codes and categories were chosen before analysis began).

Coding was guided by Nölleke et al.'s (2021) framework for defensive mediatization. The coding process used NVivo software to assign keywords to text segments which allowed identification and grouping of statements later on. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was used to code and categorise themes. In this respect, I was led by Corbin and Strauss's (1990) definition of coding: 'The process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualising and categorising data' (61). More specifically, my process followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six-step framework. These steps are: (1) data familiarisation, (2) data coding, (3) generating initial themes, (4) developing and reviewing themes, (5) refining and naming themes, and (6) writing the report. Despite its limitations and critics (Boyatzis 1998; Roulston 2001) thematic analysis was chosen because it offers an accessible and 'theoretically flexible approach' for analysing qualitative data (Braun and Clarke 2006, 77). As a result of this process, responses from participants were recontextualized and restructured in the context of defensive mediatization strategies (Kiger and Varpio 2020). This allowed me to establish thematic maps and place each defensive strategy into more specific institutional levels — across the macro, meso, and micro levels. The defensive mediatization strategies (persistence, shielding, immunization, steering) identified during interviews across the macro, meso, and micro levels at the IOC are explored in further depth throughout Chapter 5.

As interviews were conducted over a timespan of 11 months, different themes slowly emerged throughout the interview process. This meant that the 'essential meanings and deeper implications' (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018, 119) of the interview data became apparent one transcript after another. These themes initially emerged as broad discussion points. For example, the levels of access granted to Olympic journalists, their experiences covering the Olympics as a member of the media, how they felt about the IOC as an organisation, before becoming more refined and specific. In this way, some themes were discarded as the interview process continued (see Appendix I). This occurred when these themes failed to adequately address the study's research questions. Defensive mediatization emerged as the defining framework which most effectively categorises the

relationship between sports journalists and the IOC. As such, it became the central focus of later interviews.

The integration of defensive mediatization into my interviews links to Brinkmann and Kvale's (2018) observation that: 'The thematic focus of a project influences what aspects of a subject matter the questions centre upon, and which aspects remain in the background' (44). In this regard, after initial interviews formed broad themes, I then focused specifically on seeking answers that pertained to the objective of 'protecting against or avoiding media attention' (Nölleke et al. 2021, 744). Later interviews would focus on specific incidents and Olympic media stories that paid particular attention to defensive mediatization strategies deployed by the IOC and how journalists respond to them. In this respect, over time the questions posed to participants became much more focused on their direct experiences of defensive mediatization. Early interviews were helpful to establish the boundaries of the study in broad terms. This approach follows what Flick (2018) describes as a flexible, qualitative research design which permits changes to occur and new directions to emerge throughout the data-gathering phase.
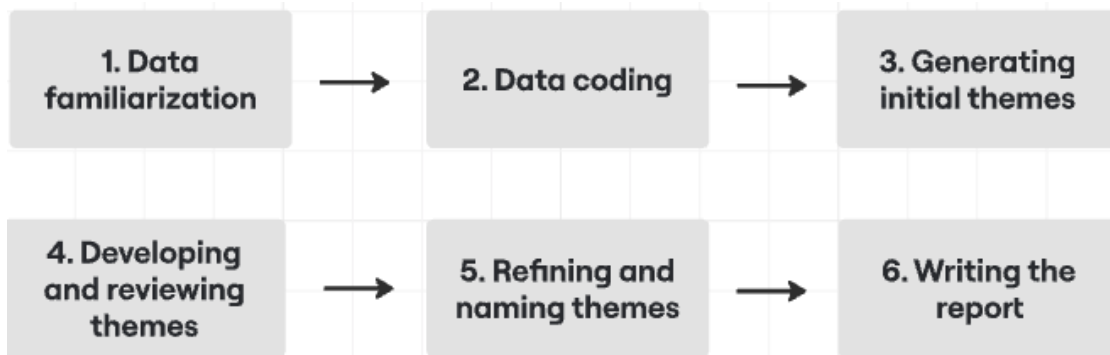
Figure 4: Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six-step framework for Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

Evidence obtained from early interviews was utilised to then place more focus in later interviews on dimensions of defensive mediatization across the micro, macro and meso levels, according to Nölleke et al.'s (2021) framework. Participants described instances in their careers where they were blocked, impeded and restricted by the IOC. For example, an online Olympic sports journalist for *InsideTheGames* described an incident during a press conference at the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. Members of the media were limited to one question each, with no follow-up questions permitted by the IOC press officer. This was a clear example of defensive mediatization which I

later categorised according to the category of 'shielding' at the micro level. This example demonstrates my process of inquiring about participants' experiences of defensive media tactics and categorising their answers according to Nölleke et al.'s (2021) framework. Their guide led my investigation, as I sought to add further empirical evidence to this existing structure across the three institutional levels.

Coding and categorising my participants' answers meant identifying which institutional level their examples corresponded with and which defensive mediatization category each fit into — *persistence*, *shielding*, or *immunization*. When participants' answers did not correspond to existing strategies, I added a new defensive mediatization strategy, labelled as *'steering'*. Containing similarities to two previous strategies (shielding and immunization) *steering* emerged as a distinct defensive strategy used by the IOC. I define *steering* as 'guiding the media towards desirable ends' (O'Boyle and Gallagher 2023, 671). It formulates an important aspect of this study which highlights its unique contribution towards expanding our understanding of defensive mediatization. Similarly, it demonstrates the careful categorization of participants' responses. Using Nölleke et al.'s (2021) framework was essential, but likewise was the need to move beyond their structure and add a new category from my data. This approach responds to their call for providing a 'more nuanced understanding of mediatization' (739). *Steering* is discussed in greater detail throughout Chapter 5.

The implementation of a rolling, adaptive process of conducting interviews was central to the qualitative data collection in this study. The initial 10 interviews of this study (conducted between November 2022 and January 2023) focussed on broad sports media topics and specifically targeted sports journalists who work for large media publications, for example The Times UK, The Athletic and RTÉ Sport, rather than Olympic-specific outlets. This approach was taken to explore the existing and historic dynamics between sports journalists and large sports organisations and to ask interviewees which issues were most significant to understanding this mutually-dependent relationship. Conversations in this first interview phase centred around the topics of: access, interview etiquette, in-house journalists, press officers, requesting information from sports organisations and obtaining accreditation to attend events. Interviewees in these initial 10 interviews spoke about their dealings with sports organisations such as FIFA, UEFA, World Rugby

and the IOC, and gave examples of interactions from their careers, both positive and negative. Sports journalists spoke about their frustrations at being blocked and impeded by press officers, being denied access and having questions refused, but also reflected upon the positive qualities of communications staff at these organisations who were helpful and accommodating. Interviewees were asked which specific elements they enjoyed about their jobs as sports journalists and were then questioned about how the behaviour and policies of the aforementioned sports organisations directly impacted their ability to report on the sporting events which they cover.

The rationale behind this early-stage approach was to lay the foundations in these initial 10 interviews for understanding the wider dynamics between sports journalists and sports organisations. These opening interviews were fundamental to gaining an accurate, precise insight into the day-to-day experiences of today's active sports journalists and how the conduct of the sports organisations which they interact with on a weekly basis sets the terms and conditions for how they are allowed to do their jobs. The most prominent discussion points which recurred in these initial interviews centred around the increasingly hostile behaviour of sports organisations towards sports journalists in recent years. Interviewees listed different tactics which media staff at these organisations had used to push journalists away and create distance between reporters and the athletes, officials and managers who they wanted to interview and obtain information from. Due to the recurrence of these discussion points, interviews for this study pivoted towards a concerted focus on defensive mediatization and its presence between Olympic journalists and the IOC.

This change had two major implications in terms of future interviews: firstly, it meant an intentional narrowing of focus of participants. Whereas initial interviews were conducted with sports journalists who wrote for large, general audiences, now interviews had an increasing focus on Olympic journalists and experts who worked for publications that focussed on Olympic topics and the IOC. Similarly, I continued to target interviewees who work or previously worked for the IOC. Secondly, questions asked during interviews now focused more specifically on defensive media tactics and strategies applied by the IOC and how they impacted the work of Olympic journalists. IOC interviewees were asked how and why they applied increasingly defensive media policies raised by participants in the first interview phase, their justifications for this approach,

their interpretation of media coverage of the IOC and whether they felt positively or negatively about how the IOC was portrayed by journalists.

The interview guide now pivoted towards asking Olympic journalists to reflect on the impact of these defensive media tactics and to provide ways in which they may combat and react to them in their pursuit of rigorous reporting on the IOC and the Olympic Movement. The rolling, adaptive process of interviews in this study meant that interviews were transcribed on an ongoing basis so that the findings from early conversations could help inform, structure and guide later interactions with participants. This approach was iterative and reflexive and allowed early findings to actively inform and shape subsequent interviews (Neuman 2014). This enabled the research to progressively focus on emergent themes whilst maintaining flexibility to explore novel insights as they arose (Kiger and Varpio 2020). This ensured accuracy in terms of findings because this structured, adaptive approach prioritised the expertise of participants to help guide future interviews, while also allocating space for the researcher to interpret and analyse their responses.

A key strength of this study was the quality of participants interviewed and the exclusive nature of securing interviews with individuals with Olympic experiences and IOC expertise which link centrally to the research questions. Because of interviewees' expertise and knowledge, it was suitable and appropriate to allow early responses to guide subsequent interviews (Flick 2009), allowing for the incorporation of defensive mediatization as the guiding framework for this study. Due to the fact that defensive mediatization became the main topic of discussion in the second phase of interviews for this study (conducted from February-October 2023), some themes which emerged in early interviews were discarded. Athlete representation in the media by sports journalists, nationalism at the Olympic Games, technological media changes at the Olympics, audience reception and brand/sponsorship narrative storytelling were all topics which arose during interviews which were largely discarded (see Appendix I). Although partially relevant and worthy of discussion in other contexts, the contribution of these topics was not directly related to answering the study's specific research questions.

3.8 Ethical considerations

In the process of devising the methodological approach for this study, all necessary ethical considerations were taken into account. As this study deals with human subjects, it was important to take the relevant steps and precautions that are required when conducting in-depth interviews. As noted by Brinkmann and Kvale (2018): 'Interview research is saturated with moral and ethical issues' (28). These include the potential stress caused to participants, obtaining consent, confidentiality, verification of responses and the consequences and ramifications of the published study. However, due to the nature of this study involving sport and media, the level of risk was ultimately very low. Participants selected for interview were all adults aged over 18 and their consent was given with the signing of Dublin City University's Ethical Consent Form (see Appendix A). A Plain Language Statement was provided to all participants, which they were required to read before taking part in the study (see Appendix B). At any point during the interview participants were free to withdraw. Participants could also refrain from answering any question which they were not comfortable with. Throughout Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, I limit the identity of each participant to their job title and organisation. This was implemented to maintain consistency across interviewees. For example, the following are ways in which participants are identified: Chief Sports Writer for The Guardian, Olympic Correspondent for the BBC, Director of Communications for the British Olympic Committee, Media Manager at the IOC. Small additional details about participants are occasionally provided, such as how long they have worked in their position, or how many Olympic Games they have reported on.

These decisions address a chief ethical concern within interview research, which is researching private lives and placing accounts in the public arena (Mauthner et al. 2001). This research has protected participants' identities, obtained all necessary consent and focused on the dynamics between its two core actors involved, the IOC and sports journalists, without personalising affairs. In terms of placing accounts into the public arena, it is necessary to reiterate that the IOC is one of the most influential international sporting organisations. Research which closely inspects this organisation is in the public interest (Jennings 2012) as is research into the role of Olympic journalists. There is a significant public value in obtaining a deeper insight into closely guarded international organisations including the IOC. Likewise, as argued by Kuneliusit and Reunanen

(2016), it is in the public interest to understand how journalists cover organisations that intentionally deploy defensive strategies to 'seal themselves off and avoid media coverage' (Nölleke et al. 2021, 742).

A specific ethical consideration in this study concerns my role as the author of this study (Mayer 2005; Oates and Pauly 2007). In the process of conducting qualitative research, it is imperative to reflect on the role of the researcher (Hansen 1998; Hansen and Machin 2019). Given my experience working as a sports journalist and my prior professional relationship with some participants in this study as colleagues, it is necessary to acknowledge this as a potential conflict of interest. Discussing the act of practitioners conducting research in their own field (Priest 2010) notes: 'It creates a stronger mandate to consciously set aside preconceived expectations, especially if we are already a member of the group we propose to study' (96). Previous studies have been conducted by current and ex-sports journalists who would later work as media scholars (McEnnis 2016; Sherwood et al. 2016; Flindall and Wassong 2017; English 2017; Buzzelli et al. 2020; Robertson 2024). This remains valuable research as long as it does not fall into what Hills (2002) labels as 'endless self-interrogation and narcissism' (73). A study examining the experiences of sports media professionals, written by a former sports journalist, may be regarded as more insightful and well-informed. Quandt (2008) argues that participant observation can result in ethical problems but remains suitable in journalism studies because 'some professionals are only observable by other professionals' (133).

3.9 Limitations of research design

This study's research design has certain limitations which are important to discuss. These limitations include the study's lack of gender balance in participants, its focus solely on Olympic journalists and the IOC, and its qualitative approach using one-on-one, in-depth interviews. Providing a justification for the study's methodological and theoretical approach provides a layer of critical context in terms of its research scope and underlying motivations. The first limitation is that this study is restricted to examining the IOC and sports journalists. Other stakeholders including Olympic athletes, sponsors and fans of the Games were all considered for potential qualitative interviews. Each of these groups has a significant impact on the Olympics. Yet there

has already been extensive research on media coverage of Olympians (Billings 2008; Hutchins and Mikosza 2010; Kristiansen and Hanstad 2012; Kovacs and Doczi 2019), the media consumption habits of Olympic fans (Li, et al. 2018; Devlin et al. 2020; Smith-Ditizio 2023) and the importance of sponsors in shaping the Olympics (Yazdanparast and Bayar 2020; Baim et al. 2021). This study limits its research focus towards examining the dynamics solely between sports journalists and the IOC as an institution. The interactions between media and their sources are dictated more so by institutionalised routines and processes than other factors (Cook 1998; Sparrow 1999). It is also necessary to reflect on my choice to focus solely on Olympic journalists, excluding journalists who cover other areas of sport. Findings from this study offer a level of insight into sports journalists and sports organisations, but are not representative of all Olympic journalists or every major sports organisation. Similarly, the IOC was purposefully selected to elicit focused, specific insights which can be used as a foundation for comparison with other sports organisations. The absence of studies which explore the IOC according to its relationship with sports journalists makes it a unique choice for providing new knowledge.

A second limitation to consider is this study's gender balance in terms of participants. Every effort was made to reach out to, and conduct interviews with, female participants who work in sports journalism and at the IOC. However, only five interviews in this study were with female sports journalists and IOC officials. This fact is reflective of the male-dominated sports media industry, where just 10% of current sports journalists are female (Boczek et al. 2023). It is also indicative of the lack of female representation within the IOC historically and many other sports organisations, particularly in senior leadership positions (Chambers et al. 2004; Hardin 2013; Schoch 2013; Whiteside 2013). This topic was discussed by female participants in this study. The male-dominated history of the IOC is reflected upon further in the findings chapter (Chapter 4). Likewise, the absence of more female voices in framing our understanding of the Olympic Games is also discussed later in this dissertation. Despite the greatest efforts being made to ensure a diversity of voices across gender, age, race and nationality, this study's lack of gender balance highlights the role of a male-dominated media in framing our perception of the Olympics. It also underscores that, despite consistently promoting messages of gender parity at the Paris 2024 Games, a male-dominated hierarchy still exists within the IOC (Boykoff 2022) and impacts its decision-making and governance from within.

A third and final limitation to discuss is this study's use of in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews are considered one of the most effective methods of gathering data in qualitative research (Harding 2018). Benefits include the ability to gather specific information on professionals' working experiences, as well as obtaining in-depth insights, contextual information and reactions from interviewees (Hennick, Hutter and Bailey 2011, 131). However, there are drawbacks to in-depth interviews which are necessary to consider. A researcher requires skills to build rapport, must possess the ability to react in real-time to what is said, and requires the flexibility to change the order of topics within the interview guide. Additionally, the process of transcription is time-consuming. In-depth interviews are also a recurrent and common method of data gathering within journalism studies (Weaver and Löffelholz 2008). Alternative data-gathering methods including surveys (Suggs 2016), focus groups (Fast and Kaun 2014; Shehzad and Yousafzai 2017) or a content analysis of Olympic media products (Birkner and Nölleke 2016) were all possibilities given their success in other mediatization studies. However, given my research objectives of gaining a deeper insight into the experiences of Olympic journalists and their interactions with the IOC, in-depth interviewing was the most suitable approach despite its limitations. Described by Barbour (2008) as the 'gold standard' (113) for qualitative research, interviews were the most effective data-gathering approach to answer this study's specific research questions (Flyvbjerg 2006). It has proven a highly effective strategy in other sports mediatization studies, which bolsters the argument for its use in this study too (Borges 2019; Frandsen and Landgrebe 2022). No other individuals than those who work at the IOC and operate as sports journalists could credibly explain their relationship and the impact of defensive mediatization. Using their knowledge, experience and insight as the basis for this study and eliciting that information via direct conversations was therefore suitable and appropriate.

3.10 Conclusion

This chapter has described the methodological approach employed in this study. It outlines the decisions made in constructing the study's design and the motivations behind those choices. In this chapter, I argued in favour of using in-depth qualitative interviews to gather data. I outlined the process involved in recruiting participants and the background of these individuals. I assessed the

method by which I interviewed the 50 participants in this study and the process involved in analysing the subsequent interview data using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) with Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six-step framework. Underpinning my research approach, I explained my use of Nölleke et al.'s (2021) framework for defensive mediatization. My study adds further empirical evidence to their exploration of defensive mediatization as a theoretical construct. In this methodology chapter, I outlined the ethical considerations involved in completing the study's research design. These ethical considerations involved the recruitment of participants, obtaining consent, providing anonymity and professional conduct during interviews.

In this chapter I also discussed my professional background as a sports journalist. My role was important to reflect upon as, according to Brinkmann and Kvale (2018), the researcher is critical 'for the quality of knowledge and for the soundness of ethical decisions in an interview inquiry' (34). I discussed practitioners conducting research in their own field and its value, particularly in the field of journalism. Finally, I outlined the limitations of this study's research design. These include my choice of in-depth interviews, the lack of gender balance in participants and the study's focus solely on Olympic journalists and one sports organisation in the IOC. Overall, my research approach places an emphasis on the role of the researcher as a subjective interpreter of information (Braun and Clarke 2006). Participants were carefully chosen on the basis of their professional credentials, the organisations they work for and the knowledge and experience they possess in the Olympic world. They were selected as the most qualified and credible sources who are best positioned to explain the IOC's relationship with sports journalists, both in the past and the present. By eliciting their insights through in-depth interviews, developing broad themes, and categorising them according to Nölleke et al.'s (2021) framework for defensive mediatization, my research design provides a sound method for addressing the study's research questions. These research questions concern Olympic journalists' professional identity, but more specifically how the IOC's strategic deployment of restrictive media strategies has impacted these media professionals and the implications and consequences of these tactics.

Building on this study's research design, in the next chapter I will provide the first level of analysis of the empirical evidence gathered by providing a descriptive outline of findings. In doing so, I aim to demonstrate that the study's methodology was carefully and successfully followed. Chapter

4 uses illustrative quotes from this study's 50 participants to map out four key themes which emerged. These themes are: Olympic sports journalists' professional ideology; mediatization strategies; the IOC's motivations for engaging with journalists; the adversarial and symbiotic relationship between the IOC and journalists. The following chapter is therefore structured to use the words of IOC officials and sports journalists to provide a diachronic portrait of their complex, antagonistic relationship.

Chapter 4: Empirical Findings

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a detailed outline of the key empirical findings, observations and themes derived from the in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in this study. As outlined in the previous chapter, a total of 50 interviews (comprising more than 36 hours of interview data) were completed with journalists, broadcasters, sports writers, International Olympic Committee (IOC) officials, and media managers. Drawing on perspectives from both parties, this chapter details how the IOC and sports journalists engage and relate to each other. It discusses key themes that emerged from rigorous thematic analysis, including the motivations which drive sports journalists to report on the Olympics, how they define their professional ideology and the challenges they encounter as a result of defensive mediatization. I explore the working conditions of sports journalists covering the Olympic Games and inspect the difficulties they face reporting on large-scale sports organisations such as the IOC.

This chapter is structured around a discussion of four key themes which emerged after thematic analysis of interview data using NVivo. This constitutes the first level of interpretation of findings. The chapter that follows (Chapter 5) then synthesises these empirical findings and theoretical insights to elucidate key fault lines in the working relationships between the IOC and sports journalists. The four themes discussed in this chapter are: (1) Olympic sports journalists' professional ideology (2) Mediatization strategies (3) The IOC's motivations for engaging with journalists (4) An adversarial, symbiotic relationship between journalists and the IOC. Each of these four individual themes are further dissected into discussion points which integrate the arguments involved. For example, the opening theme in this chapter discusses Olympic journalists' identity. This incorporates their personal and professional motivations for reporting on the Olympics, how they view their role covering the Games, their sense of fandom and how it may compromise their objectivity. These findings also incorporate how journalists differentiate between reporting on the IOC as an organisation and the Olympics as an event, plus their reflections on the decreasing number of specialised Olympic-focused journalists working in media today.

The second theme will present evidence of the different offensive[4] and defensive mediatization strategies implemented by the IOC. I discuss the underlying motivations behind these strategies, their consequences and how journalists react to them. In particular, the deliberate application of defensive media tactics helps to elucidate the deterioration in relations between journalists and the IOC. As described in the methodology chapter of this study, after the completion of early interviews mediatization emerged as the defining theoretical driver which best characterises and conceptualises the two parties relationship. For these reasons it constitutes a central theme in this chapter, before being given more attention and in-depth discussion in the analysis chapter to follow. The third theme directs focus more squarely on the IOC and their motivations. This section explores the IOC's purpose for journalists within their own communications strategy, their respect for the work produced by journalists but more significantly focuses on the frustration and distrust towards journalists which has emerged in more recent years. This third theme ends with reflections from participants on how the IOC cultivates media relationships, particularly with international journalists from all around the world. The fourth and final theme in this chapter explores the reciprocal perceptions between the IOC and sports journalists. After examining each party independently, this theme integrates their perspectives in order to provide a deeper insight into their mutual views. This theme discusses the mutually-beneficial relationship that exists between the two parties and also addresses the adversarial nature of their relationship. This final theme addresses the hierarchy that exists within the group of media professionals who cover the Olympics and concludes by discussing the evolution of journalists' relationship with the IOC over time.

Chapter 4 of this dissertation presents the initial stage of analysis, thematically categorising patterns which emerged from the interviews conducted. The subsequent chapter then applies the lens of defensive mediatization in order to systematically interpret these themes more deeply. The decision to structure the analysis in this two-stage manner is reflective of both an inductive and deductive orientation. The findings chapter presents a grounded interpretation of interview data, while the defensive mediatization model is then used in Chapter 5 to explain current journalistic

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[4] Throughout this chapter, the term 'offensive' mediatization refers to the dynamic, proactive ways in which the IOC seeks to attract media attention by employing tactics which accommodate journalists (Nölleke 2021, 738). For clarity, it does not mean causing someone to feel resentful or annoyed. Eg: causing *offense* with a remark.

practices. This structure aligns with a dual interest in how the relationship between Olympic journalists and the IOC has changed over time (diachronic perspective) and how it operates now today (synchronic perspective). Chapter 4 includes temporal, thematic reflections on shifting routines, relationships and pressures faced by Olympic journalists, while the defensive mediatization framework offers a more static snapshot of how these individuals currently negotiate the power and practices of the IOC and Olympic stakeholders. Mediatization allows for both diachronic and synchronic perspectives particularly when analysing sport (Dalla and Bonnet 2022). This is because mediatization is a concept which 'conveys historical change' (Kortti 2016, 118) but can also capture insights at a particular period in time. The interviews for this study, purposefully blending a mixture of older and younger participants with a range of different Olympic experiences, were intentionally conducted to surface both types of insights. The thematic analysis captures perceptions of change across time, particularly changes in access, source strategy and editorial expectations, and can therefore be read as a diachronic narrative. The subsequent analysis via the lens of defensive mediatization in Chapter 5 offers a synchronic interpretation by illuminating how Olympic journalists currently resist or accommodate institutional pressures enforced on them by the IOC today.

While this framework robustly captures numerous defensive strategies implemented by the IOC, it presents limited explanatory power in terms of long-term changes in the profession. For example, the decline of legacy media's Olympic footprint in recent years, the rise of digital content demands, and the professionalisation of the IOC's communications apparatus. Each of these broader, longitudinal shifts are better explored through the thematic chapter of this study. Therefore, although defensive mediatization does provide a significantly valuable lens for capturing how Olympic journalists maintain professional boundaries in Olympic reporting, it does not entirely capture the complexity of other influences shaping their work. In particular this approach underplays structural pressures such as shrinking newsroom resources, reliance on freelance or short-term contracts and the increasing dominance of platform-based metrics in editorial decision-making within contemporary sports journalism. These dynamics make Olympic journalists more susceptible to aligning with the IOC's messaging and communications strategies, not necessarily out of active 'resistance' (Strömbäck 2008, 239) or defensive positioning, but rather because of this broader precarity within the field of journalism today (Nelson and Cohen 2025). For this, the

IOC cannot shoulder complete responsibility. Other factors, for example generational differences in attitudes toward objectivity, or variations between legacy print journalists and digital-first sports reporters, also suggest internal stratifications within the profession of sports journalism which cannot be easily explained by a binary defensive logic.

Therefore, while the defensive mediatization model remains useful and beneficial, its application in this study is tempered with an awareness of its conceptual boundaries. Themes such as the changing nature of journalistic access, the evolution and decline of the Olympic beat, and audience disinterest in critical Olympic coverage each emerged strongly across interviews. These themes could not always be reduced to a binary of either strategic resistance or accommodation. Instead they reflected a deeper structural transformation in how sports journalism operates today. They illustrate the importance of complementing a synchronic theoretical model in parallel with a more expansive, thematic reading which is grounded in professional history and practice. For these reasons, the presentation and exploration of findings across two chapters accommodates this study's interests in how the relationship between the IOC and journalists has changed over time (Chapter 4), and how the defensive mediatization model provides a static, synchronic picture which illustrates current practices today (Chapter 5).

4.2 For the Love of the Games: Olympic journalists' professional ideology

(i) Olympic journalists' identity: duty versus fandom

Sports journalists interviewed for this study were keen to emphasise the sense of "duty" they felt in their jobs reporting on the IOC and the Olympic Games. Many acknowledged they have a "privileged platform" that very few individuals in everyday life (and indeed, athletes themselves) will ever get. One Olympic sports journalist who works for The New York Times said: "We are, in many ways, the only people who will hold these great organisations to account." A number of sports journalists said they can reach large audiences with their work and can therefore have their voices heard. Their opinions are respected by many, they can draw attention to issues that are important to them, and their reporting influences important figures in government and within the Olympic Movement. Explaining the need for sports journalists to hold the IOC accountable in the context of London being awarded the 2012 Olympic Games, Jennings (2012) stated : 'Sport is big

business, holds huge sway over politicians. It is in the public interest that sport should be properly scrutinised' (30). A participant who has written multiple books about the Olympic Games and is a columnist for American newspapers explained this sense of "purpose" for journalists covering the Olympics:

> *"For me, that is what journalism is about… going to people who are powerful, to seek out forms of authority and domination and to challenge their legitimacy. That is what actual journalists do. I have seen some really great journalism in the Olympic sphere that has tried to live up to that ideal."*

These expressions by Olympic sports journalists illustrate what McEnnis (2016) describes as the 'professional ideology of sports journalism' (968) which prioritises public interest, truth, accuracy and impartiality. These are values applicable to all facets of journalism, but McEnnis' study shows that sports journalists see their work as facilitating public discourse 'on a range of social, political, economic and cultural issues' (968). Building on this framework, participants were encouraged to reflect on their professional ideology. When asked about journalists' responsibility to hold the IOC accountable, a participant who writes for USA Today and is a TV contributor for CNN, said: "Asking the tough questions is what I do. I've been doing it for decades and the IOC is no different for me. If I don't do that, it's a wasted opportunity and I'm not doing my job correctly." For these reasons, some participants said they do "feel a duty" to provide reportage on the Olympics and the IOC which is robust and calls out injustices. They believe that their professional ideology as a sports journalist necessitates this sense of responsibility.

One sportswriter who covers the Olympics for Irish broadsheet newspapers including the Irish Independent and Irish Examiner, said he felt a responsibility to Olympic athletes to tell their stories "in the right way" and be a bridge between athletes and fans. He remarked: "I think if I serve one function, it is being a messenger between the athletes and the spectators." Other Olympic journalists said their work in the media can help make the Games more "transparent", "clean", "trustworthy" and "believable" for audiences and fans, who have no platform of their own and do not have direct influence on the sports they watch. Another journalist, who works as a TV reporter and sports columnist in America, illustrated the power and influence she has in her job by citing

the example of Peng Shuai, the Olympic tennis player who went missing in 2021. Due to censorship of Chinese media, this journalist's decision to ask IOC President Thomas Bach about Ms. Shuai's disappearance was the first time many Chinese journalists became aware of the incident. This participant, who questioned IOC President Bach about Ms. Shuai's disappearance, said this emphasised the responsibility she felt to shed light on issues which would otherwise go ignored and unreported.

> *"I grilled Thomas Bach on the disappearance of Peng Shuai at the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing. I told Bach that Peng Shuai was the biggest #MeToo story in the world, and I asked him what he was doing about it? I went into how Peng Shuai had been sexually assaulted, how her social media posts disappeared. Bach gave me an awful answer. But it's an example of one of the toughest questions a journalist can ask. A few journalists approached me after that press conference. By asking a question about Peng Shuai, it was the first time these Chinese journalists had ever heard about her story. It had been censored in China, so they had no idea. I had never thought about my work that way."*

These responses provide an initial understanding of how Olympic journalists perceive their roles and construct their professional identity. This ideology frames Olympics journalists as reporting on the Games as sports reporters, but simultaneously providing a public service role to inform audiences about the underlying realities of events. Participants said they feel a duty to their audiences and to Olympic athletes themselves, both of whom often "do not have a platform" to share their opinions and thoughts. Journalists possess the influence and authority to bring attention to stories which are important to them. Participants acknowledged the "privilege" of this position. They said this motivates their work to provide entertaining analysis of the Olympics, while at the same time holding the IOC accountable for its decisions and activities in staging the event.

In contrast, however, other participants said they report on the Olympics because it fuels their own personal fandom. They described themselves as passionate sports fans, as well as professional journalists. Fandom can undermine sports journalists' professional ideology because it deviates away from the 'public interest, truth, accuracy and impartiality' which are integral to the profession (McEnnis 2016, 968). These core elements of journalism can be seen in coverage of the Olympics

where issues of doping, corruption, bribery, abuse, gender inequality and sportswashing are prevalent. Several participants said they report on the Olympics because they "grew up watching the Games" before pursuing a career in media. A TV commentator for Ireland's state broadcaster RTÉ, who has reported on seven Olympic Games said: "For me, it's the pinnacle for any sports broadcaster to go to an Olympic Games." Their love of the Olympics is an intrinsic factor in their decision to cover the event. On this topic of fandom, a senior broadcast reporter at multiple Olympic Games added:

> *"You're there with ringside seats to history. And you're being paid to be there! You do have to pinch yourself sometimes. I remember sitting in the front row watching Usain Bolt break a world record in Beijing and you have to keep telling yourself that you're watching history. What I love about the Olympics, more than any other sport, is you're genuinely watching lives change in front of your eyes as an Olympic reporter."*

Other sports journalists stressed that while they enjoy the Olympics as fans, this does not "impede" their work. They said it is possible to be a fan of the Olympics as a spectacle, while also being rigorous and objective in their work. This was a difficult topic to discuss with participants, many of whom were reluctant to engage on this issue. The question sought to assess how biased sports journalists can become, particularly when they are fans of the sports they report on, and due to developing close relationships with athletes and officials. The accusation of sports journalists simply being 'fans with laptops' (English 2017, 537) has been, and continues to be, a contentious critique of the profession. As Hardin, Zhong and Whiteside (2009) explain: 'Sports operations have been described as toy departments because of their deviation from journalistic norms' (319). Asked if being fans of the Olympics called into question their integrity or cast doubt on the legitimacy of their work, participants offered a mixture of answers. Some agreed, and others outright rejected the suggestion. A veteran Olympic sportswriter for the Associated Press outlined his view:

> *"I love the Olympics. And I think it is possible as a human being — and as a journalist who has been honoured to cover 20 Olympics in a row — to find the whole thing just thrilling. I feel that you can get a tear in your eye at the opening ceremony as the flags are*

waving and the nations are coming in, or they are playing the Olympic Hymn... and then
be sitting at my laptop writing a column criticising the International Olympic Committee
for any number of things that they have done."

A Daily Telegraph sports journalist added to this view. He said it was possible to admire the sporting events and achievements that "unfold before our eyes" while they sit in the press box at the Olympics, while simultaneously "casting a critical eye". This individual explained that being a fan of the Olympics and working as a sports journalist were not "mutually exclusive." Another experienced American sports columnist said the key issue when discussing the fandom of Olympic journalists was a sense of balance and perspective. The participant explained that "being critical for its own sake" was not useful, but being overly fawning and praiseworthy was also "dangerous." This individual said it was their role to convey the sense of excitement that comes with the Olympics, while also calling attention to less glamorous elements of the sporting spectacle. They said:

> *"When I'm there with that media credential around my neck... figure skating, gymnastics, swimming, track and field... all those awe-inspiring, once-in-a-lifetime moments... it's extraordinary. You need to be critical when needed, and also be in awe when that opportunity arises. I think that is the answer to being a journalist covering the Olympics. You can be thrilled to be there and also be a journalist. You can write one negative column and write another about an athlete's performance which is a great moment in sports history. I'm never going to pull any punches in my work."*

Other sports journalists said that reporting at an Olympics was the "pinnacle" of their profession. One BBC sports broadcaster said being chosen was a "lifelong ambition." He explained this was not solely in terms of being a fan. Rather, it was in journalistic terms, being at the forefront of a historic event and being given the opportunity to report stories which would have an impact and be memorable. Recalling his first Olympics in 1988, this sports broadcaster said:

> *"My very first Olympic Games in Seoul, we had a fantastic position very near the finishing*
> *line. Ben Johnson won the 100 metres in 9.79 seconds, which was a record. Several days*

later, he was done for doping. I've never been to a more historic press conference. I was in the front row and you're dealing with a story which is going to bring down the reputation — not just of a sprinter — but the entire Olympic Games! That 100 metre event and the banning of Ben Johnson… you're reporting on a story which is going to be at the heart of journalism."

For decades, sports journalists have faced accusations of operating with lower standards (Horky and Nieland 2011). These findings provide a more nuanced understanding of how their reporting is framed and shaped. These observations highlight the motivations that drive sports journalists to report on the Olympics. However, it also raises concerns about how these motivations impact their work and how organisations including the IOC can potentially manipulate and exploit this sense of fandom.

(ii) Differentiating between the IOC and the Olympic Games

From the outset, sports journalists were keen to stress the importance of differentiating between reporting on the IOC and reporting on the Olympic Games. While the IOC is the organisation which runs, organises and stages the Olympics, the Games are a 'quintessential global media event' (Rivenburgh 2002, 32), which attracts significantly more media attention. Participants explained that the type of media reporting on the IOC and on the Olympic Games differs greatly. Summarising the scale of their task, a Guardian journalist said reporting on the Olympics was simultaneously the "biggest honour and biggest challenge" of any sports journalist's career. An Irish television commentator, who has reported at nine Olympic Games, said: "I have covered loads of World Athletics Championships, more than 75 major golf championships, about 14 Ryder Cups, but the Olympic Games is the single most daunting event to cover." An American sports journalist for The New York Times added: "Every day you wake up at the Olympic Games, you just do not know what sort of a day you're going to have. It is so unpredictable. It is so large." Participants pointed out that different types of journalists with significantly different motivations report on the IOC as an organisation, and on the Olympic Games as a sporting event. There is naturally a degree of crossover. However, participants emphasised that many sports journalists see their remit as vastly different to each other. Such journalists made a notable distinction between reporting the politics and governance of sport, positioning themselves as different to colleagues

who report solely on sporting events. An American sportswriter for the Los Angeles Times, who is also a former Olympian, explained:

> *"I do think that if you are a journalist and you travel to an Olympic city, you have a responsibility to figure out how local residents in that city are impacted by the Olympics and the IOC, in positive and negative ways. We all know that there are journalists who will do that. Who will get out there and talk to people who would never be handed a microphone otherwise. And then there are those journalists who don't have any interest in that, and they think those stories are beyond their remit."*

While the IOC is the entity which runs and oversees the Summer and Winter Olympics, the type of media reporting it attracts and the motivations of journalists who cover the organisation differs greatly. Sports journalists who report primarily on the IOC and its governance view themselves as holding the organisation "accountable for its decision-making", seeing themselves in the vein of Fourth Estate Journalism. This type of journalism, according to Kovach and Rosenstiel (2021), is categorised as having an adversarial relationship with its subject matter and the individuals and organisations they report on. Adversarial journalism exists so that the affairs of powerful institutions, the IOC in this instance, 'should be known to all, not just the privileged' (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2021, 18). Participants said that challenging established narratives, conducting deep investigations and scrutinising decision-making are all core elements of this form of journalism associated with the Fourth Estate. It is sports journalism which acts as a mechanism to hold the IOC to account and acts as a critical watchdog. This is especially prevalent in terms of the bidding process for Olympic host cities given the substantial sums of taxpayer money that is allocated. One participant in this study who focuses their coverage on the IOC and the politics and governance of sport for Olympic news website *InsideTheGames*, agreed with this sentiment. They said: "My job is to inform readers. If I go to a Games, I'm not there to primarily write about the sporting events, even though I do that too. The best reason for going to any Olympic event is because you get face-time with IOC officials."

Conversely, sports journalists who attend the Winter and Summer Olympic Games and report exclusively on sporting matters perceive themselves as a distinct category of reporter with a

different remit. A BBC sports broadcaster admitted: "The best bits are the actual Games, of course." This journalist said he acknowledges and "respects the need for" watchdog, adversarial journalism in respect to the IOC and the Olympic Movement. However, he said he views his role as reporting solely on sporting matters. These journalists' motivations concern sport for its own sake, reporting on "athletic achievements, world records and gold medals." One UK sports writer, reflecting on the Tokyo Olympics, said many journalists simply do not have the time to conduct deep investigations while also reporting on sporting events taking place each day. He explained that the daily schedule of events is so demanding that "even if I wanted to conduct journalism that drew attention to injustices", the reality of day-to-day sports reporting made it "almost impossible". He stated:

"When I went to Japan [for the 2021 Tokyo Olympics], I was the only person covering my region. I was just covering sport 24/7, right? It's the hardest I've ever worked in my life. You're so busy reporting on running and swimming, or basketball, or cycling, you don't have time to zoom out and hold the IOC to account."

The challenging nature of reporting at an Olympic Games for four weeks without a break was a recurrent discussion point among participants. Some sports journalists said they felt "exhausted and sleep-deprived" during the Games, facetiously comparing the gruelling daily workload of the media to that of the Olympic athletes they report on. The constant demand for stories and deadlines in difficult time-zones made their job additionally challenging. They said these factors impacted their ability to report stories outside of sporting events and official IOC-organised press conferences. Due to these demands, deadlines and time shortages, journalists said they had limited alternatives but to adhere to the daily schedule of sporting events and press activities facilitated by the IOC and host city. Discussing the rigorous challenge of reporting on the Games, one American sports broadcaster for NBC said: "Some nights were maybe three hours sleep in bed. That's the same for everyone. I've seen journalists, not so much collapse, but I've seen them frequently falling asleep at their desks between events at an Olympics."

Another sports journalist for The Guardian said he and many of his colleagues also felt a "pressure to perform", much like the athletes they report on. He said being sent to cover an Olympics is a

"prized honour" which is greatly sought after by sports media professionals. Consequently, being chosen by a media outlet carries an inherent need to deliver results. Feeling this pressure was a motivator and a source of anxiety for many sports journalists covering the Olympics, knowing it could be a "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity". A sports reporter for The Washington Post said:

> *"The size of the Games is one of the reasons why you probably think about the stresses of an Olympic Games for two or three weeks before you actually travel out there. You're wondering… am I going to cope. How am I going to cope with this?"*

An Associated Press sports writer added: "I would go to an Olympic Games and take one sort of metaphorical deep breath and think: okay, I'm going to survive this, just so long as nothing goes catastrophically wrong, you know?" Discussing how much time was needed to research and prepare notes to commentate on an athletics event on TV at an Olympics, another participant said there was little time left for anything else: "You have to do your preparation for the evening session, the finals and semi-finals of events. You end up needing five hours to prepare for your TV commentaries, but your desire is just to fall asleep at your desk. That's one of the biggest challenges."

These observations about the difficulties and challenges faced by sports journalists point to a potentially unintended manifestation of defensive mediatization on behalf of the IOC, where journalists are forced to comply with official narratives. Constrained by deadlines and time shortages, journalists have no other option but to attend the press conferences, mixed zones and events staged for them by the IOC. On the one hand, the IOC facilitates the media by giving them the access they need. On the other hand, participants said this is the type of access that is intended to emphasise positive aspects of the Olympics which "reflect well on the organisers." Participants said the opportunity for dissenting voices, critical opinion and in-depth reporting are reduced because of the environment in which the Olympics takes place: four weeks of ongoing sporting action which is energy-sapping for journalists on strict deadlines. Regardless, these observations draw attention to the contrasting remits reporting on the Olympics as an event and the IOC as the organisation which stages it. Some journalists are motivated to cover the "glory and action" of sporting events. Others are drawn towards scrutinising the governance and politics of the IOC.

(iii) Impact of fewer specialised Olympic journalists

A recurrent finding that emerged during interviews was a notable decline in the number of specialised journalists that cover the Olympics as a distinct subject. In the past, numerous publications, TV stations and newspapers employed a dedicated correspondent whose sole remit was to cover the Olympics. This is often no-longer the case. This decline is indicative of wider trends of newsroom cutbacks, reduction in salaries for sports journalists, the 'poaching of top talent' (Buzzelli et al. 2020) by rival sports outlets and a diminishing interest in reading about the Olympics from general sports audiences (Tang and Cooper 2017). Participants said this reduction in Olympic-focussed journalists has led to significant consequences. Firstly, it means the IOC is less scrutinised as an organisation because there are fewer reporters paying attention to its activities, attending their meetings and covering IOC Sessions in person. Secondly, it means there are fewer full-time journalists being sent to cover the Olympic Games than before because editors struggle to justify the expensive costs.

According to one participant, this has resulted in a notable increase in freelance journalists covering the Olympics. These journalists have to write for multiple publications to "justify the cost of flying to cover an Olympic Games". Sports journalists working on a permanent, full-time contract with an established media publication is becoming less commonplace. Participants said this discussion point raises important questions. Firstly, why publications required a specialised Olympic journalist in the past, but not anymore. Secondly, what benefits exist for having one highly-specialised journalist who covers the Olympics. A Washington Post journalist said that in the last decade many publications can no-longer "justify having a dedicated Olympic journalist, when the Games are so sporadic." A sports journalist for The Guardian added that the growth of in-house journalists at sports organisations is adding to the already-precarious nature of freelance sports journalism. "These in-house journalists are offered work by newspapers. They're killing the freelance game. Freelance sports journalists are being told: *sorry, we don't want you.*" These observations show there are fewer full-time contracts available for sports journalists covering the Olympics and less specialised Olympic journalists covering the topic. Consequently, this has caused increased rates of freelancing within Olympic journalism, and additional difficulties for

those freelance journalists who now must compete with in-house journalists for the limited opportunities available.

These responses from participants also highlight the difficulty for news publications covering the Olympics and the IOC, particularly during intervening years when no Olympic Games take place. According to a journalist from Olympics website *InsideTheGames*, most fans "pay little attention" to news about the Olympic Movement "outside the four weeks when the Games take place." This raises considerations as to how sports editors should cover the Olympics and the IOC in the intermittent years. Similarly, one sports editor questioned how he can justify employing dedicated journalists for a topic that is "so irregular and sporadic in the sports calendar." A TV commentator for Ireland's state broadcaster RTÉ said IOC media staff make an extra effort to support and accommodate journalists because the Games are so sporadic. He suggested the IOC needed to maximise the media spotlight for that short period.

> *"Olympic sports don't get a huge amount of airtime in the three-and-a-half years between each [Summer] Olympic Games. So the IOC generally tends to be really cooperative because they want to give as much exposure to their event as they can."*

Participants said the diminishing number of dedicated sports journalists who cover the Olympics has consequential effects for the IOC yielding both positive and negative outcomes. Positively, it means they "receive less scrutiny". This means the IOC can make decisions with less intense media focus than in the past, when there was a larger press pool reporting on their activities. It means fewer journalists attending IOC Sessions, asking difficult questions. This allows the IOC to go "unchecked and unchallenged" and is a failure of journalism to hold powerful institutions accountable for their decisions and behaviour. Negatively for the IOC, however, fewer sports journalists covering the Olympics also means less positive coverage too. This means there are fewer stories being produced about the Olympics and a reduction in the number of journalists who can afford to attend the Olympic Games. An official who works in the IOC's media department said they wanted as many experienced journalists with knowledge about the Olympics reporting on the Games:

"The more people that media organisations can have covering the Games, the better it is for everybody. It takes the pressure off the couple of individuals who have got the experience within that media organisation to cover the Olympics. But then, it also gives them greater capacity to write knowledgeably about the Olympic Movement."

Less Olympic-specific journalists on the ground means less Olympic-related content being produced, which results in less attention from audiences and fans. This has a number of negative consequences for the IOC. Its product diminishes in value because it is being watched and discussed less frequently. This harms the Olympics from a commercial perspective for sponsors and therefore negatively impacts the IOC's profitability. Likewise, another participant in this study who works for the Evening Standard newspaper in the UK, highlighted the negative consequences of the declining number of journalists who specialise in smaller, niche Olympics sports:

"There are only a few journalists who specialise solely in swimming, and smaller Olympic sports need to treasure those journalists, and athletes should treasure them too. Those journalists are travelling across the world to cover these athletes' stories. The day that stops, the amount of coverage those athletes receive will reduce, and they'll find that they are worse off because of it."

The reduction in media coverage of smaller, niche Olympic sports, driven by a shortage of journalists, diminishes the value of broadcast TV rights. This Evening Standard journalist said this is a "detrimental consequence" for the IOC because broadcast rights deals are its main source of revenue. Finally, participants were keen to highlight the level of detailed knowledge about the Olympic Movement possessed by these specialised Olympic journalists. These journalists have years of experience and insider knowledge reporting on the IOC and the Games, and this insight informs their coverage. The Olympic Movement is a complex entity, and participants explained it is necessary to have knowledgeable and informed journalists who know the Movement "inside and out". An IOC communications official said: "The more media that cover the Olympic Movement, the better it would be for all of us, because it would give us richer, more in-depth coverage of the Games." Because these specialised journalists are fewer in number than before, it results in

"general sports journalists" reporting on the Olympic Games who otherwise cover a variety of different beats, assignments and sporting events (World Cups, Six Nations, NFL, Wimbledon).

However, the lack of institutional knowledge regarding the operations of the IOC and the Olympic Movement results in a diminished quality of media coverage. This coverage is less informed on how the Games are staged and the intricacies of niche Olympic sports. Participants said stories produced by these less experienced colleagues, in addition to the questions they ask at IOC press conferences, are not at the same high standard as journalists who have been reporting on the Olympic Movement for decades. An Olympic journalist who works for *GamesBids.com*, a website focused on news about the IOC and Olympic bids, explained: "Those journalists who have followed the Olympic Movement and understand the Movement and who have followed the Games for many years, tend to have a competitive advantage." This situation is a challenge both for sports editors and the IOC. It means the IOC must engage with sports journalists who are "ill-informed about Olympic affairs". An IOC communications official said this causes immense frustration and can lead to "misinformation spreading" due to a lack of insight and "ignorance about how the Olympics operates". For this participant, this is evidenced by his experience of "stupid questions" being directed at the IOC press office on a regular basis.

4.3 Mediatization strategies

<u>(i) Offensive Mediatization</u>

The second theme which emerged from interviews concerns mediatization, which describes the interdependence across social domains that rely on media (Lundby 2012). Mediatization is a long-term process which emphasises how media are implicated in cultural and social change and 'come to condition, but not determine, human interaction' (Hjarvard 2008a, 106). It draws attention to the ways in which institutions adapt and conform to the needs of media, but also pull against these demands too. In this process, journalists represent intermediaries who conform to media logic in shaping their content for specific audiences and platforms. However, they also shape and influence the communications strategies inside organisations, who often prioritise media needs to elicit journalists' attention and coverage (Strömbäck 2011; Kammer 2014). Participants in this study described different ways in which the IOC proactively encourages media coverage by employing

tactics that accommodate journalists. These tactics are labelled as offensive mediatization (Elmelund-Præstekær et al. 2011; Peleg and Bogoch 2012; Marcinkowski et al. 2014). They represent strategies used by sports organisations to generate a heightened level of media coverage. Offensive mediatization strategies are characterised by having an open and welcoming approach to journalists. Sports organisations seek to foster positive media coverage by treating media members favourably and facilitating opportunities to produce content. Examples provided by participants include press conferences, mixed zones, one-on-one interviews and off-the-record media briefings. It is necessary to differentiate between offensive and defensive mediatization (Scheu 2019). By doing so, and giving explicit examples of each, we can further delineate strategies used by the IOC to encourage and accommodate journalists, but also impede and obstruct them too (Strömbäck and Van Aelst 2013). According to a former marketing director, the IOC understands the importance of accommodating journalists compared to other sports organisations: "If you juxtapose how the IOC comms team deals with the media versus UEFA, Formula One, the NFL, they're much more professional. Much more commercial-oriented. They understand background. They understand helping journalists. They will say: *'Joe, this is on background. This is how this is really unfolding, but we don't want to be quoted on this.'*"

A sports writer for The Guardian echoed these sentiments, explaining that during each Olympics the IOC provides a variety of press conferences, mixed zones and interview opportunities for journalists: "On the positive side, they have daily briefings at the Olympics, which are very good. At least the agenda is being set." Another sports journalist for The Times also compared the IOC's efforts to accommodate journalists with other sports organisations: "You don't get that with FIFA. At the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, we had one press conference from Infantino [FIFA President Gianni Infantino] just before the start and then we had another at the end. There was *nothing* in-between. When you go to the Olympics, there's IOC press conferences every single day, there's always news for us to report." A sports journalist for The Daily Telegraph added that the IOC does try to help journalists by staging different media events, stating: "There's always topics to talk about. In that respect, the IOC does things pretty well." He said that while athletes and officials often avoid answering questions and often deflect from controversial and contentious topics, it was still important to credit the IOC for giving journalists the opportunity to scrutinise and probe. "With press conferences and mixed zones, at the very least you are getting to see them [athletes and IOC officials] and try and ask a question. It's not like you're going to get an exclusive one-on-one all

the time. It's often bland platitudes, but at least you get to speak to them." An online Olympics journalist for *InsideTheGames* said that "access is a real problem in sports journalism nowadays, but I wouldn't say it's a problem at the Olympic Games."

However, a sports journalist for The Irish Times cautioned that the IOC only accommodates journalists when it is in their best interests: "Journalists are useful to them when they have a positive story to tell. Journalists can be very useful in getting that story out to the world. But if there's a corruption scandal, or even recently with the Olympic Committee in Paris getting their offices raided[5]… when there's a difficult story, they want to keep journalists as far away as possible." Participants explained that the IOC makes active efforts to accommodate journalists by employing these proactive strategies. Often, these media events do not result in "ground-breaking journalism", but participants explained how this underscores the responsibility on journalists to ask rigorous questions, probe and hold their subjects accountable. Participants said it was "not the IOC's responsibility" to do journalists' jobs for them. Rather, the IOC has the power to set up media events and journalists can perform their role within these spaces. The IOC can influence journalists' behaviour, but these same journalists still have choices and autonomy in their work. By creating media opportunities, inviting journalists in and treating them with respect, the IOC hopes to generate positive and sympathetic media coverage, but this is not guaranteed. An Olympics media manager said having positive working relationships with journalists was paramount. She said that in the build-up to an Olympic Games, she invites journalists to their offices. This is done in order to brief journalists, ask what interview requests they have, and to give explainers on how the specifics of niche Olympic sports work. She said these efforts are implemented so that Olympic journalists are "better prepared and informed" on the subjects they will be writing about when they arrive at the Games. This Olympic media manager explained her approach, whereby they arrange a large press event ahead of the Games for the benefit of journalists:

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[5] In 2023 the offices belonging to the organising committee for the 2024 Paris Olympics were raided by the French national financial prosecutor. The raid was part of a probe into illegal activities concerning alleged favouritism. The IOC provided a minimal response to journalists about the raid, with a spokesperson stating: "We have been informed by Paris 2024 that they are cooperating fully with the authorities in this matter and we would refer you to them for further information."

"A few months before the Games, we have a big press conference. I bring everybody [different representatives of Olympic sports] together in a room. We get nearly every media agency turning up, there's a huge appetite. We're telling the journalists what to watch and how to watch it. I also give them a huge media document. All to try and make the journalists' job a bit easier. Athletes do presentations on behalf of their sports. Sometimes we get a coach to talk about who the exciting Olympians to watch are. We also offer interview opportunities with officials. Suddenly the journalists are more engaged, more knowledgeable in what they're covering."

All of these examples highlight the importance of Olympic sports organisations maintaining positive relationships with journalists and the different tactics they use to actively encourage media coverage of their athletes, officials, activities and events. By employing offensive mediatization, it is the motivation of the IOC to generate positive coverage. It allows more control over media narratives, choosing which officials and athletes are allowed to be interviewed. These media events help to inform journalists on specific Olympic topics, thus increasing the likelihood of accurate reporting on IOC affairs. As summarised by an IOC media officer: "At the IOC, we recognise that journalists need to understand the facts for more fulsome reporting." Participants also warned that offensive mediatization may give the impression of transparency and respect for journalists. However, these tactics only encourage media coverage which depicts the IOC and the Olympic Games in a positive light. A sports journalist for ARD in Germany warned that journalists must be aware of being manipulated by the IOC to "regurgitate" positive stories with no pushback:

"They [the IOC] are very professional in spreading stupid, superficial news about figures, numbers, ticket sales. But what you have to understand is that if you have 95% of the journalists from news agencies who just spread what the IOC is publishing, then they have their goal achieved. With these press briefings, the IOC's propaganda is just republished."

Participants said these tactics which accommodate journalists allow the IOC to frame itself as being "open and transparent" with the media. However, as explained by a New York Times journalist, such tactics are carefully managed, staged and planned in order to "encourage positive storylines." Similarly, decisions regarding which athletes and IOC officials are selected to be interviewed, and their tendency to deflect questions during these interactions, underscores the contradictory nature of offensive mediatization. Hosting press conferences and allowing IOC

officials to be interviewed portrays the IOC as being respectful to the role of the media. However, the choices made in the construction of these media events, and decisions regarding which journalists get invited, emphasises the motivations behind these tactics. Participants argued that the goal of these offensive/proactive media tactics is to uphold a positive image of the IOC and the Olympic Games, using journalists as a vehicle in this process. However, by not accommodating journalists, refusing to stage media events and ignoring journalists' needs, the IOC can harm its image and reputation. A sports journalist for ARD in Germany said it is important for sports organisations "to encourage journalists to be critical" for the organisation to maintain "the illusion" of a public image which is fair, honest and accountable.

(ii) Defensive Mediatization

The other approach of managing journalists which has been identified in this study is via defensive mediatization. In contrast to the offensive mediatization tactics described in the previous section, these are strategies which aim to impede and block journalists. The goal of defensive mediatization is to prevent and reduce negative media coverage. This is achieved by putting measures in place which distance journalists from their subject and create obstacles that complicate their reporting efforts (Nölleke et al. 2021). Sports journalists described a number of restrictive strategies used by the IOC to obstruct them and disrupt their work. These include ignoring journalists' requests for comments, hiring increasing numbers of in-house communications staff, replacing in-person media events with Zoom meetings and issuing libel and defamation letters threatening legal action. Other defensive tactics include issuing media packs and press releases, using spokesmen as "blockers", media officers "sitting in" during interviews, limiting the number of questions during press conferences and providing extensive media training to athletes and IOC employees. These strategies are evident across the macro, meso, and microlevel of the IOC. As such, the empirical findings illustrated here will be synthesised in the next chapter alongside theoretical insights to elucidate key fault lines in the working relationship between the IOC and sports journalists.

Officials working at the IOC explained the reasons why they feel such defensive media tactics are often necessary. As summarised by one IOC media officer: "Occasionally, you do have to be nasty to a few people." One of the repeated examples of defensive mediatization referenced by participants was the IOC's increasing tendency to ignore journalists' requests, not reply to emails and offer "no comment". This passive approach is predicated on the belief that withholding an

official IOC response to a potential scandal or controversy will result in less coverage (MacAloon 2011). A participant who works for The Daily Telegraph said the very act of responding signals a sense of "validation" to a story, giving it "more credence." Ignoring a story, and journalists' questions, allows the news cycle to move on without gaining unnecessary traction. A former IOC media director explained: "The IOC wants to go about its business and do it as quietly and as effectively as it can." This response illustrates Nölleke et al.'s (2021) view that organisations deploy defensive mediatization to 'shield themselves from media publicity' (738). Journalists' role is to hold organisations accountable for their actions, however organisations such as the IOC wish to evade this scrutiny and perform its activities in privacy, outside of the media spotlight. A former IOC media director said he felt the organisation has become "much more silent" in recent years and this was an intentional strategy: "The IOC and its membership has become a quieter and more restrained organisation in their comments to the media." Another participant, who also previously worked for the IOC's media department, added to this point:

> *"The IOC tends to be extraordinarily reactive instead of proactive in its communication strategy nowadays. Its communications tend to be very anodyne and vanilla. It tends to not take controversial positions and tries very hard not to offend. This year in particular (2022) the IOC President has been clear in dealing with the Russian situation. Strong words have been called for. But because the IOC is in the business of diplomacy, it practises a very European-oriented style of diplomacy where it takes great care not to give offence to anyone or anything."*

This response offers one explanation for why the IOC employs different defensive strategies in its dealings with the media. A sports journalist who has produced investigations critical of the IOC said the organisation increasingly takes the "silent approach" to journalists: "I have been very critical regarding Thomas Bach [as IOC President]. But if you do these kinds of stories, nowadays my feeling is the IOC tries to ignore us. It's better for them not to talk, because that would extend the discussions, and that would backfire on them." Another investigative journalist cited an example of a documentary which was critical of the IOC President. He contrasted how that story was "attacked" by the IOC, but more recent stories have been ignored by the organisation in order to avoid unnecessary extra attention:

"They try to ignore journalists. I remember in 2013 we did a documentary on Thomas Bach. It was in Argentina, in Buenos Aires, where the IOC Session took place, where he was seeking to be elected IOC President. All of his supporters went through the hall and tried to tell people there is a negative story coming up, 'but don't believe them, don't take it too seriously, it's totally biased'. They tried to attack our documentary because he wanted to become IOC President. So it was important in the election campaign to fight against us. But nowadays, the IOC ignores us totally. The best strategy [for the IOC] is silence."

Another example of defensive mediatization highlighted by participants was the IOC's use of Zoom and virtual online meetings. Instead of hosting media events physically in person, more and more press conferences and media briefings are conducted online using video calling technology. This was necessary during the Covid-19 Pandemic for health reasons and the use of Zoom has become increasingly popular by sports organisations since 2020 (Gentile et al. 2022). However, Olympic journalists said its continued use post-Covid has limited their ability to conduct in-depth reporting, build contacts, network and gain off-the-record information. A sports journalist for The Times explained:

"With IOC meetings now all virtual, it's pretty much cut the cord. Groups of journalists used to come to the IOC Executive Board meetings in Lausanne. But because it's all on Zoom now, it's eliminated the physical face-to-face interaction that used to occur between reporters and the IOC. That's how you'd really get to know how things work."

Participants said that by hosting press conferences on Zoom, it gives the IOC increased control. They can decide which journalists are invited to attend, can choose which journalists are called upon to ask questions, and can "mute journalists if they speak out of turn" or ask too many questions, according to a Guardian sports writer. This limits journalists' ability to ask follow-up questions. It also allows IOC officials to speak at length without addressing the question that was asked, "filibustering", as this Guardian interviewee explained. A final defensive mediatization tactic identified by participants was the increased use of media training. This is the act of teaching IOC officials and Olympic athletes how to respond to journalists' questions and how to conduct themselves during press conferences and interviews. The motivation behind this training is to prepare those speaking on behalf of the IOC to deal with difficult questions from reporters and uphold the organisation's image in the public eye. A sports journalist for The Evening Standard

said IOC officials are "trained to say nothing" and "anything that causes any sort of interest or controversy, they'll avoid it." Media training, and other defensive mediatization strategies described above (which will be analysed in further depth in Chapter 5), illustrate the intentional tactics used by the IOC to obstruct and impede the work of sports journalists. Participants said these strategies naturally made their work more difficult, while IOC officials argued defensive media tactics were "necessary" to protect the organisation and uphold its public image.

(iii) Motivations behind IOC media tactics

Participants working at the IOC outlined reasons for applying media tactics to encourage journalists and also distance them when required. They said that proactive, offensive media tactics are a more straightforward process of treating journalists favourably in order to elicit positive media coverage from them. Defensive mediatization is a more complex process where media managers simultaneously acknowledge their respect for journalists, while putting measures in place to obstruct them. Explaining this contradiction, a senior IOC communications official said the organisation has been irritated by "unfair coverage" from journalists in recent years:

> *"You get frustrated in the sense that journalists are not interested in our side of the story. They're interested in the narrative that they have before they come to us. Sometimes we're not even quoted. We go to great lengths [at the IOC press office] to always give a response. We don't expect people to agree with us, but we hope to get a fair crack of the whip, which we don't. There is often a misunderstanding, or a misperception of the IOC's work and the public becomes misinformed by the media."*

Another IOC official added to this view, explaining that there is often "lazy journalism" in reporting on the IOC and its activities. He said the IOC's increasingly defensive and conservative approach to media relations was borne out of this sense of frustration with the work of journalists:

> *"Look, if we don't get across our message entirely, that's our problem, we need to work harder on that at the IOC. But do I think that people understand the IOC? No. I think it's very easy and occasionally also very lazy journalism to just criticise us. Big organisations tend to get criticism. We're not a perfect organisation, we have done a lot wrong in the past. But I think that's the nature of the beast: bad news sells. People are interested in bad news. That's the world we live in."*

Other participants said a key motivation behind defensive media strategies is simply to uphold the IOC's reputation, which has come under significant criticism throughout recent history. One former IOC marketing director explained: "The brand is the most precious thing any organisation has. It's unduplicatable. The Olympic brand is so unique and the IOC tries its best to protect it." Another individual said the IOC's self-governing, insular structure is an indication of why it treats journalists unfavourably and distances itself from external media by not engaging. He said this mentality comes directly from its president, Thomas Bach. This participant cited Bach's exploits as an Olympic gold medal-winning fencer as an insight into his mentality and why self-reliance is a key tenet of the IOC's communications strategy under his regime:

> *"I do think the IOC comes across a little bit like the Politburo. I've worked under Samaranch's regime, Rogue's regime[6], Bach's regime. This one's different. His style.... it's mirrored throughout the entire organisation. Think about this, Thomas comes from a sport that's not a team sport: fencing. He was always one athlete against another. He doesn't rely on anyone else. Doesn't need anyone else. Doesn't want anyone else. I'm not sure the IOC appreciates and understands that an informed media, not a friendly media, but an informed media can actually help them."*

Another participant, who worked at the IOC throughout the 1980s, added to this view of needing to "protect" the Olympic brand. He argued that the IOC's dealings with journalists is increasingly defensive because of the Olympics' struggle to remain relevant today: "The IOC don't see journalists as *'an enemy'*. But the IOC is struggling with the reality that the things that were special and unique about the Games have lost that sheen and relevance. How do we remain relevant? How do we remain special? How do we remain neutral? That's what keeps them up at night." Some participants argued that a key reason why the IOC applies restrictive, defensive media strategies is because the organisation is held to an impossibly high standard. IOC officials, and indeed some journalists, suggested the organisation is saddled with wider societal issues and often faces unfair criticism. Issues such as climate change, transgender politics, homelessness and human rights are all used as "sticks to beat the IOC with", according to a participant who works for *InsideTheGames*. He stated: "They're held accountable for so many things that are outside of their control or remit in a very aggressive manner. Many journalists try to saddle the IOC with every social ill on the

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[6] Juan Antonio Samarach and Jacques Rogue are both former IOC Presidents.

planet." Another sports journalist agreed with this view, positing that while it was crucial for the IOC to be held accountable for its actions in staging the Olympics, some media coverage "went too far" in lambasting the organisation:

> *"I think the average punter out there does not believe it's the IOC's core mission to perpetuate world peace. It's not the IOC's core mission to save the world from climate change and solve world hunger and homelessness. But when you read some of these tirades in the media… I just feel like they need to educate themselves better on what the IOC is supposed to do. When the IOC does fall short, then it should be fair game. But some people would slam the IOC if they made a casserole that wasn't cooked properly!"*

A BBC journalist argued that there is a "misconception" among many media critics of the IOC regarding its role and responsibilities. He explained that because the IOC is held to such a high standard, it is logical for the organisation to be more hostile towards journalists in recent years:

> *"The IOC is not going to solve the world's problems. Sometimes the expectation of Bach and the IOC is that they are going to solve everything. Because they can't, it's viewed as having failed. Take the transgender issue. The IOC is never going to find a solution to satisfy everybody. This is a very complicated issue with all sorts of human rights stances. No matter what, you're going to get hammered as being out of touch, wrong, insensitive. The IOC and the Olympics are often hijacked for a particular cause. It's a bloody sports event. It's a miracle they somehow get 210 countries to turn up each time."*

These responses offer a variety of explanations for why the IOC feels it necessary to apply restrictive, defensive media tactics that bypass, obstruct and impede journalists. Viewing journalists with increasing scepticism, informed by critical media coverage of the IOC, the organisation has responded by applying the defensive strategies illustrated earlier. The ultimate goal of these tactics, according to participants, is to minimise critical coverage and uphold the IOC's image and the Olympic brand.

(iv) Reacting to mediatization

Sports journalists explained their responses to the different media strategies mentioned in this chapter. They welcomed and complimented the IOC's efforts to stage a variety of media events

like press conferences, mixed zones, interviews and informal media briefings. However, they also remarked that these media events are carefully staged and often result in "bland, boring and corporate" content and quotes, according to a sports journalist for The Irish Examiner. Sports journalists also discussed ways they attempt to counteract defensive strategies by the IOC. Examples include obtaining information off-the-record and on "deep background", as opposed to via official channels such as press offices. Another example of combatting restrictive media strategies identified was sports journalists' need to work together with their colleagues. For instance, this can be witnessed when journalists repeatedly follow-up with the same line of questioning if they feel an official is being evasive during a press conference. This technique was labelled by one individual as "badgering" and "haranguing" Olympic officials if they avoid an important question or "deflect from the truth." However, a number of participants struggled with defensive tactics applied by the IOC and were unsure how to react to them. Several sports journalists were pessimistic about their diminishing levels of access and how sports organisations can now "dictate terms" in relation to media coverage, as well as bypass journalists by producing their own content.

A sports journalist for Deutsche Welle in Germany said in-depth reporting on the IOC was essential for ensuring accountability. He argued that the simple act of persistence and tenacity, despite the IOC's efforts to impede journalists' work, was vital: "We're not going to stop in our reporting. Stories like doping scandals, the Russian war in Ukraine, which all impact the IOC, I think as journalists we need to always remember the victims, and not give up on telling these stories." A Washington Post sports journalist said obtaining information from multiple sources, off the record, and on deep background was an increasingly common approach today. Using unnamed sources, protecting their anonymity in return for information, has become increasingly "necessary" in sports reporting in response to defensive tactics. He explained: "Certain journalists have been doing this job for so long that they develop their network of sources. Obviously sometimes you have to go to the official press office. But the great journalists will bypass the press office… they're not sending an email to IOCPressOffice@gmail.com or whatever. They have people they can go to for information." A sports journalist for The Daily Telegraph added to this point, arguing that the act of direct messaging sources, athletes and officials on social media has become popular. This practice cuts out the role of the press officer, aiming to eliminate their potential to intervene. He said:

"Press officers (sighs)… you'd rather they just didn't get involved, to be honest. Nowadays we contact athletes and sources on social media, especially ones that don't have a massive following. Obviously you're not able to message Simone Biles or Thomas Bach on Instagram and get a response. But a lot of stories I've done lately, I've reached out on Instagram, or Twitter, or LinkedIn. It's easier to access the athlete directly nowadays."

A BBC sports writer echoed these sentiments, citing an example of when he attempted to contact a source directly via social media, but the intervention of a press officer made his efforts more difficult: "When a press officer gets involved things start to slow down, because they want to take control. We did a story recently with this boxer competing in the European Games. She's a refugee boxer. She's in prison and we had a colleague get in touch with her on social media. But then a press officer got involved… it was a nightmare, the whole thing, to try and finally do the interview." Some participants said they do feel a subtle, unspoken pressure exerted on them. This is evidenced in a "fear of losing access", according to an Irish Times sports journalist. This fear can result in journalists pulling back on critical coverage. Interviewees said they felt conflicted by such situations, knowing that they should not avoid reporting negative stories because it may jeopardise future access. A veteran Olympics newspaper reporter explained this dilemma:

"At the beginning of my career, I was always hesitant to write anything that was quite negative, especially when the IOC were hesitant to give me accreditation. I remember the first time I wrote something negative about [IOC President] Bach just after he was elected… I knew if I wrote something negative that he's the one who could call the shots. A lot of sports organisations will retaliate and say: 'Well, I'm just gonna cut you off now.'"

A sports journalist for Olympics news website *GamesBid.com* said it was a journalist's job to battle against defensive strategies and to "create transparency." He said he understood the IOC's motivations for viewing the media with a degree of suspicion, but argued this should not deter journalists from mining for information:

"I'm sure the IOC is frustrated because, you know, everybody in journalism is trying to get clicks. Trying to get the headlines, right? The media officer at the IOC says this a lot in his press conferences. But oftentimes he avoids answering our questions. He has this line he likes to say to journalists when we ask a tricky question and he bats it away with a boring

answer. He'll say: 'I know that's not the headline you're looking for!' So we're always digging for information, which is our job. We have to create transparency."

Another veteran Olympics journalist agreed with this view, explaining that the time-honoured journalistic practice of "doorstepping" IOC officials has been effective throughout his career as a way to combat defensive tactics. Doorstepping occurs when uninvited journalists suddenly show up unannounced (traditionally, at a politician's front door) to ask questions and demand answers: "In 1993 we were all wondering who was going to win the bid to host the 2000 Olympics. Manchester was in contention. I was at the Indy [the Independent newspaper]. I went to Manchester Airport because IOC President Samarach was coming to have a look around. There was very little chance to speak to him, so I just nabbed him at the airport to ask him questions."

A number of participants admitted feeling "powerless" to the working conditions which are dictated to them. Diminishing access, fewer interview opportunities, extensive media training and threats of libel letters have become accepted realities of modern-day sports reporting. A sports journalist for the BBC said today's reporters often have to settle for "what is given to us" and sometimes feels resentful at having to appear "grateful" for the limited interview opportunities that are made available by sports organisations. Sports journalists also said they worry if their work reporting on the IOC "has a real impact" in terms of causing change, or changing the public's perception of important issues. An investigative journalist for ARD Germany said he felt his work did have a real-world impact, especially documentaries about doping scandals:

> *"Particularly in Germany, what ARD has done when it comes to doping, we had an influence on the perception of the Games, the perception of the IOC, because more people understood that doping plays a remarkable role. So our Russian story, when we did stories about East Germany, when we did stories about cycling, people understood there are two sides of the medal when it comes to sport. So, yes, our stories helped maybe provoke a different view on sports."*

A fellow German Olympic journalist added to this view, explaining that in-depth reporting on the IOC impacts the public perception of the Olympics in his country and therefore influences a country's willingness towards hosting the Games in the future. He said this ability of journalists' work to impact viewing figures of the Olympics and the willingness to host the Games shows the

importance of their work. He said it also explains the IOC's application of defensive media tactics against journalists.

> *"In Germany, we get many reactions to our reporting. There is a majority of people nowadays against German bids to host the Olympics. For what reason? Because people don't trust the sports movement now, they don't trust the IOC. The sports officials have a very bad reputation. The public believes that many athletes are doping. Maybe this is because of our coverage. All of this means they're not going to want to watch it and they're not going to want to host an Olympics."*

A separate sports journalist working for Deutsche Welle said he felt conflicted about reporting on the IOC. On the one hand, he said sports organisations including the IOC, FIFA and UEFA receive "too much attention" and focus should be on the athletes competing. However, he said it was also paramount to make the public aware of the power that these organisations yield in staging these popular sporting events:

> *"I think for a lot of people, the IOC is probably meaningless. Which is why I think as a reporter it's our duty to make the connection: 'look, this is what you guys are enjoying on TV and these are the powerful people behind it.' And it might seem all meaningless and it might just be some boring sports federation with some acronym. But the IOC do wield a lot of power. As a journalist, for me, it's trying to hold these people to account."*

These responses underscore journalists' intent to counteract defensive mediatization, but also reveal their struggles in achieving this objective. Sports organisations including the IOC yield considerable power and communications resources which strive to minimise negative media coverage. Participants described how they employ a variety of tactics to obstruct and impede journalists and to deflect from scrutiny. Sports journalists outlined some limited ways they maintain robust reporting on the IOC and the Olympic Movement. However, many conceded that it is difficult to do so, owing to increasingly arduous working conditions.

4.4 The IOC's motivations for engaging with journalists

(i) Examining the IOC's purpose for sports journalists

I now turn my attention more intently on the internal perspective of the IOC. Participants who work for the IOC were asked to provide a detailed explanation of the organisation's different communications strategies. This section of the chapter presents their responses, with this theme placing a specific emphasis on what role journalists' play in the IOC's communications strategy. Participants repeatedly stated that they still see a number of justifications for maintaining good working relationships with external media. Indeed, the IOC sees the media as playing a central role in transmitting the values of Olympism to audiences, power brokers and sponsors. An IOC media director explained: "Traditional media is still incredibly important. Firstly, because they still set the agenda. Secondly, traditional media still form opinions of leaders, people who take decisions. And when you work for a big multinational organisation like ours, you need to work with a lot of heads of state and government." This inclination to continue engagement with traditional media aligns with previous literature which emphasises the media's role as an intermediary between sports organisations, fans and influential decision-makers. Chappelet (2008b) argues that the Olympic values are 'passed on' by mediators such as journalists and the Games preserve their 'unique value as a cultural heritage for humanity' (105) through their work.

The IOC recognises that without external actors such as sports journalists to report on proceedings and infuse the Games with meaning, the event loses its significance. The meaning-making power and influence of sports journalists still exists, even in a modern media ecosystem where many of these journalists feel marginalised and struggle with the erosion of their professional identity (Sant et al. 2013). Another IOC media manager agreed that influential power-brokers, heads of state and government officials formulate their opinions of the IOC by reading work produced by sports journalists in reputable publications. He said that these powerful figures read the New York Times, watch the BBC and are "less likely to get their information and opinions [about the IOC] from stuff they see on social media." This IOC media manager said the role of sports journalists in formulating the public perception of the organisation is still significant. For an organisation which relies heavily on commercial sponsorship, it is paramount that the IOC recognises the consequential influence of sports journalists. He said: "We need money from sponsors to carry out

our mission. So I think traditional media is still very, very important for influencing our key audiences and stakeholders." Previous studies in this area have argued there is less impetus for sports organisations to engage with traditional media because they have the resources to produce in-house content (Berke 2011; Wang and Zhou 2015; Sherwood et al. 2016). A participant who works as a media and commercial manager for an Olympic organisation based in Europe said the landscape of sports media has changed entirely in recent years. The power balance has tipped in favour of sports organisations such as the IOC, who have the financial resources to control their own narrative. She said:

> *"The way sports organisations put out messages has changed completely in recent years. 20 years ago, of course, you needed PR and media to spread your word and have that interaction with your fans and other stakeholders. But nowadays, you control the message, your own message that you get to decide, via your own channels and platforms."*

This point echoes Sherwood, Nicholson, Marjoribanks' (2020) argument that sports organisations' ability to create their own content via digital platforms represents a shift in the relationship between sports organisations and the media. This rise of in-house content represents sports media when journalists 'are excluded from the process of content creation' (Schwartz and Vogan 2017, 45). It allows sports organisations to bypass traditional media and build a positive narrative that the IOC can control. On this point, participants explained that it is important to maintain a balance between in-house content and content produced by external media which the IOC cannot fully control. One participant, who works for the IOC's communications team, said traditional media still serves a vital purpose: "Where *'the media'* still has an importance for us, is that they reach people we can't. The traditional media allows us to hit a much bigger audience, in terms of getting our messages out there, than we could just through our own channels." A sports journalist for The Daily Telegraph added to this view, arguing that traditional media publications have a "built-in legacy of credibility" developed over decades. For this journalist, publications such as the New York Times, NBC, the BBC and Reuters carry "weight and significance in the eyes of the public" which the IOC does not possess. These publications are each recognised as respected media entities with decades of experience and a proven track-record reporting on stories in an objective manner (Daniller et al. 2017). In their mission statements these news publications are not "beholden to

stakeholders within the Olympic Movement", but serve their audiences and the public first and foremost, according to this Daily Telegraph sports journalist.

The IOC is predisposed to producing content which portrays itself in a favourable light. A participant who works for the IOC's communications team declared: "The team here at the IOC is focussed on two things, making sure the host city succeeds and that it gets the best Games possible. That's it." The in-house content produced by sports organisations is invariably designed to present the organisation in the most favourable light. Audiences recognise this bias and actively seek information from a variety of external sources, including traditional media, who are perceived as more objective. It is for these reasons that the IOC still sees a purpose and a benefit for maintaining positive relationships with traditional sports journalists. As one participant in this study, a sports writer for ESPN, noted:

> *"Any discerning reader is going to recognise that the in-house content which sports organisations like the IOC produce is biased. The digital content they make might look very good, but it's PR (public relations). Under the current regime, the IOC is not going to produce any sort of content that is negative or critical about itself."*

Participants explained that sports journalists work for objective, impartial organisations. An Irish Times sports writer said these legacy news publications are "respected as trusted sources of information", and the work they produce reaches audiences which the IOC on its own cannot. Asked whether sports organisations such as the IOC producing their own content has diminished the role of traditional sports journalists, a Washington Post reporter noted:

> *"It is true that sports organisations like the IOC, the NFL, MLB, are producing more of their own content. But that doesn't impact me, because I'm me, doing what I do independently. The IOC and these sports organisations may think that type of content is journalism. But we know it's not the type of raw, unfettered journalism that we practise."*

IOC staff acknowledged that audiences and fans of the Olympics do not consume IOC-produced content in isolation and will naturally seek out impartial sources of information about their

favourite sports. Sources such as the New York Times, the BBC and The Guardian produce stories that are positive about the Olympics and also criticise the IOC robustly for its decision-making. Participants said the IOC demonstrates sufficient self-awareness to acknowledge the need to accommodate traditional media sources and build an understanding with them. A former IOC official said by cultivating positive relationships with traditional media journalists, they may be able to "call in a favour" to obtain more "sympathetic" coverage if a negative story or potential scandal does arise. Having good relationships with sports journalists means the IOC can, in the words of this individual, "negotiate" coverage of a scandal, and get ahead of the story before it is published. Another participant, who previously worked at the IOC throughout the 1980s and 1990s, explained this further:

> *"You've got to have good relations with the media, so that if something bad does happen, or if you are accused of something bad, then the media can feel that they can trust you when you come to them with your side of the story. Then, at least when they write their stories, you can feel that it will be fair and balanced."*

These answers highlight the importance of professional relationships with sports journalists as part of the IOC's wider communications strategy. It allows the IOC to "manage" negative stories and avert potential crises by engaging in dialogue with sports journalists. Participants were hesitant when discussing this topic but acknowledged that a sense of "give and take" does occur between sports organisations and members of the media. Having positive working relationships with journalists means the IOC can minimise damage, offer their response and explain their point of view in a fair and transparent manner. One IOC communications officer described this approach as "damaged limitations" in order to "get ahead" of negative stories.

(ii) Distrust from the IOC towards the media

Participants at the IOC said there remains a prevailing feeling of distrust towards sections of the media. One IOC media manager was keen to emphasise that this scepticism does not apply uniformly and the IOC do not view journalists "as any sort of enemy." On the contrary, individuals at the IOC said they want to "work alongside and collaborate with" the media, because it benefits all parties. However, answers did point to an unease and tension that persists between the IOC and

journalists and the reasons for it. A sports writer for The Times said: "I would say in the communications department at the IOC, they are afraid of us [journalists], they don't like what we are doing." Another participant explained the IOC's distrust of journalists more bluntly: "I think the media does a shit job of reporting on the IOC because very few people actually understand how things work." These observations concur with Chappelet (2008b), who previously highlighted this underlying sense of fear and scepticism that can exist between the IOC towards journalists: 'The IOC simply cannot allow itself the slightest blunder without it being immediately spread throughout the planet by the media' (172). This point builds on other studies which draw attention to Olympic athletes' own sense of unease with the media during Olympic Games. In their investigation of interactions between Norwegian Olympians and journalists Kristiansen and Hanstad (2012) state that journalists 'may be perceived as a stressor for elite athletes' (231). They highlight that 'the daily worry of being negatively framed may influence elite athletes to start *avoiding contact* with the media' (233).

From the IOC's perspective, participants cited examples of feeling "let down" by certain stories that were "misinformed and poorly reported." One participant, who works in the IOC's media department monitoring stories about the Olympics, explained: "Sometimes, we can see things that are said, or written, or published, and if you don't understand the full background to it, you can come away with the wrong impression of what's actually happening." Participants who work at the IOC said they do not hold reservations against the media for doing their job and their duty. The IOC's frustration primarily stems from occasions where stories are "badly sourced", where "context is missing", or result from journalists failing to conduct thorough verification and fact-checking. This discussion point pertains to the decline in the number of journalists who specialise on Olympic affairs. Because there are less Olympic-specialised journalists covering this subject area, it results in less experienced and poorly trained junior journalists "plugging the gap", as one American sports editor explained. He explained that these "less experienced reporters" lack the same depth of knowledge on Olympic matters, the quality of content they produce is diminished, and the questions they ask are "less informed". A veteran journalist for The Associated Press described this as a "lack of institutional knowledge" on the part of younger, inexperienced journalists. Another participant who previously worked for online Olympics website *InsideTheGames,* stated: "There is a lot of information out there about the Olympics and the IOC.

But if you don't *understand* it, the IOC are not going to help you as a journalist." Building on this observation, a veteran editor for Olympics news website *AroundTheRings* said some younger, inexperienced journalists "reveal their lack of knowledge and lack of sophistication" when attempting to cover the IOC.

Participants from the IOC sought to emphasise instances of "poor journalism" which has led to a sense of distrust and frustration formulating between the organisation and members of the media. Sports journalists countered that mistrust had developed between sports organisations and journalists because they were now competing for the same audiences. "Sooner or later, they have regarded us in the media as out-and-out competition," explained an ESPN sports writer. A colleague who works for Sports Illustrated added: "Sports organisations like the IOC are media companies now. We are their competition." Overall, IOC participants said they wanted to pursue a positive working relationship with sports journalists. However, they insisted that when poorly written and unverified stories about the IOC surface without calling their Press Office to fact-check or offer a right of reply, this "damages" the relationship. An IOC media officer said this issue becomes more serious when such stories "repeatedly arise" describing the slow erosion of trust as "like death by a thousand cuts." This media officer said it is imperative that the IOC and sports journalists "constantly engage with one another" on both positive and negative stories. He argued that fundamental journalistic practices such as verification, obtaining multiple sources, fact-checking, and offering a right of reply, must always be carried out by sports journalists reporting on the IOC and the Olympics. When this does not occur, it damages the two parties' relationship, resulting in the implementation of more restrictive media policies by the IOC as a form of self-protection. Senior, experienced officials from the IOC's media team outlined the overall objective of their communications strategy. They said their aim is to "promote the organisation's activities" to stakeholders, sponsors and influential power brokers and "transmit the ethos of Olympism" to its fans via a combination of in-house content and external media. A senior IOC media director explained:

> *"My job is to explain the good we do in the world, which I think a lot of people don't know about. For instance, the fact that we redistribute $4.2 million every single day to the sports movement and that we don't make a profit. 90% of the money we make at the IOC, we*

redistribute it. So our comms strategy is two things. One, to try and get some of the good news out there. The other is to explain the more difficult decisions we have to take at the IOC, like the recent decisions over the potential participation of Russians and Belarusians at the Games in Paris."

Another ex-IOC employee said an "old-fashioned mentality" which permeates the IOC's culture comes from a constant need for self-preservation, and this outlook extends to its engagements with journalists. He explained:

"There's a feeling of entitlement there. It comes with access and proximity to power. At the IOC, historically, there is a resistance to change. There is a resistance to outside opinions. No one likes to talk to anybody that threatens them or their professional abilities. There's a lot of people working there that, if they didn't have the Olympic rings on their business card, they couldn't sell heat lamps to Eskimos. It's a bureaucracy, the IOC. A mini-UN."

A participant who previously worked at the IOC's communications department was keen to emphasise how the organisation's "insular nature" is key to understanding its engagements with journalists. Having worked at the IOC for a number of decades, he said that spreading Olympism and using sport "as a vehicle to do good" made him sensitive to criticism of the IOC's work: "Very quickly it became a theology for me. It became something that was very deep and very profound. And the more I learned about it, the more I wanted to stay involved in it. It was a higher calling." This individual said understanding the "antiquated elitism" at the IOC is important to understanding how it chooses to interact with journalists. When asked to describe his perception of the IOC before being hired to work there, he said: "They were foreign. They were, you know, Mandarins. They were this Brahmin class in the Olympic Movement that was much higher than we were on the outside." This participant said that while the IOC used journalists as an important cog in their communications strategy, there was also a sceptical view of any "outsider" whose opinion could threaten the organisation.

(iii) IOC cultivating media relationships internationally

Communications staff at the IOC said they face a complex task in fostering and sustaining robust and positive international media relations. This is due to the IOC interacting with sports journalists who work in a variety of different countries with vastly different media cultures, who speak many different languages. They highlighted a significant disparity in how the IOC interacts with sports journalists who work in the United States, compared to those from smaller European countries. A communications manager for the European Olympic Committee said the prevailing message of the Olympic Movement was using sport "as a vehicle for togetherness." But promoting this message in countries with different levels of media resources and fluctuating interest in the Olympics was "incredibly difficult for sports organisations." She explained that a lack of Olympics-focussed sports journalists makes their job harder:

> *"Our aim is to spread a message of unity through sport. We try to use our communication tools as a way to spread this central message and values. But you cannot imagine how difficult it is to reach out to such different countries and cultures that differ in size and facilities and funding."*

These observations speak to previous research which has analysed Olympic media across different nations. Using China as an example, issues of press freedom and potential censorship were central to popular discourse building up to the 2008 Beijing Games. Smith (2011) highlights how there was 'a long discourse concerning the impact of the Beijing Olympics on ideas of freedom of speech and journalistic practices' (333). Each country differs in the size of its sports media industry, how many sports journalists that regularly cover the Olympic Movement and how many media members each country sends to cover the Games in person. Participants in this study said the lack of "specialised communications staff" at National Olympic Committees[7] was also an issue. The communications manager at the European Olympic Committee explained: "Of course the biggest and strongest NOCs have more resources in terms of graphic designers, social media managers, and so on, compared to the smaller ones. They use other staff members to cover communication and social media duties." She explained that larger sports organisations including the IOC face

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[7] An NOC is a National Olympic Committee. Each country that participates in the Olympics has its own NOC which is tasked with governing Olympic-related matters in their country. The European Olympic Committee (EOC) is the continental governing body which oversees the 55 different individual NOCs in Europe. The IOC is the overall organisation which oversees all five Continental Associations.

difficulties when smaller countries lack the media staff to properly communicate news about Olympians from their countries. Another participant, who works in the communications department at the IOC, said it is important to recognise the "different strengths" of media relations depending on which country, and what language, the journalist is working in. He cited different examples of this, using his experience working on the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, Paris 2024 Olympics, and the future 2032 Olympics to be held in Brisbane, Australia.

> *"If I look at somewhere like Paris, we [the IOC] have good relationships with a lot of the journalists there who covered the Paris Games. Tokyo was the same. Now, with somewhere like Brisbane, we are really just starting things off. In that instance, the relationships we have with the media will develop over time. Sometimes you do have a language barrier. For example, unfortunately we don't have a huge Japanese capacity in our team at the IOC. So anyone who doesn't speak English, covering us from Japan, probably feels that there is a gap between us and them, and it's purely on the basis of language."*

Participants explained that there are significant differences in the standards, practices, principles, resources, investment, and level of professionalism in each country's sports media (Rowe 2009). The IOC are aware of this disparity and do not adopt a uniform media relations strategy applicable to all nations that report on the Olympics. This is necessary to highlight when discussing the relationship between the IOC and sports journalists. One participant who works for the IOC internal communications team explained:

> *"One of the things I always find interesting about the IOC, compared to, say, a football club, or a basketball team, or even a continental federation or association, is that we are operating on a global stage. Our communications have to go out and appeal to the entire world, which is a very complex thing to do because you are dealing with so many different cultures, different languages, and different points of view on life."*

Cultural differences, varying standards and practices, language barriers, resources available, and the number of sports journalists each nation dispatches to cover the Olympics impacts how the IOC interacts with those members of the media. An IOC communications officer said: "The angle

for stories is different depending on which country's media we're dealing with. Culturally, the media approach is different. There's no one blanket approach for everybody in the world, in terms of how we deal with the media." Another IOC participant further explained that while constructing a communications strategy, it is paramount for the IOC's media team to evaluate what information they send to specific journalists, depending on "the journalist's role, their publication, and the country they work in." What area of the world journalists work in can see their reporting impeded by issues of censorship, embargos, limited press freedom and restrictions on certain social media platforms. This concerns journalists who work in countries where websites such as Facebook, Instagram and X (formerly Twitter) are banned. These issues are considered by the IOC when determining strategies to disseminate information to journalists. They are also taken into account when navigating professional relationships with reporters based in areas which are impacted by press censorship imposed by authoritarian regimes. One IOC communications official, who has worked for the organisation for over a decade, explained:

> *"Like any comms [communications] strategy, it starts with trying to pinpoint what you are trying to say, and to who. I actually brought social media into the IOC, but there are so many different channels now that you have to work out which channels you want to use and that depends on who you want to reach and what messages you want to give. So it's like any communication strategy for any large organisation: it's a matter of working out how you get the message you want to get across to which particular audience, and the best medium for it."*

Participants who work for the IOC said that "a premium" is placed on maintaining good relationships with sports journalists who work for what they described as "highly reputable publications that have influence". For example, the New York Times and the BBC. However, they also highlighted the importance of engaging with members of the media who come from "smaller countries that do not have access to the same resources" as wealthier nations with more developed sports media industries. Choosing to ignore journalists that operate in countries that hold different values and cultural norms can have negative long-term repercussions. As one participant from the IOC explained: "You have to take some slaps now and again. But if you *ignore* journalists, you're going to lose, because people are going to frame you whatever way they want." Another media

manager explained that it is not the IOC's job to "impose its worldview" on the media outlets it engages with. Rather, he said it is his team's job to disseminate information to the media in different parts of the world and allow journalists to verify, frame and publish that information "in the ways they see fit" for their audiences. When asked to explain his view on maintaining relationships with reporters from a wide range of different countries, this participant responded:

> *"It's incredibly important that we treat them with respect as working journalists. Part of the problem for an organisation like FIFA [world football's governing body] is that they don't engage with journalists. In the short term, I think by not communicating, you can probably get away with something. But in the long term, if you continue not to communicate, you lose control of the narrative. And if you lose control of the narrative… it's like someone once said: if you're not at the table, then you're probably on the menu."*

Viewing the media as "an enemy", as one interviewee explained, was the wrong way to approach successful international media relations. An adversarial relationship is to be expected with members of the media. But a negative, antagonistic relationship would not benefit either party. An IOC staff member said this is especially true "in a community like the Olympic Movement", where media and Olympic officials from different countries "cross paths regularly" and are familiar with each other because they attend the same events and competitions. This IOC communications executive summarised:

> *"The sports community is quite small and close, because everyone knows each other. Especially in the Olympic Movement, which is completely different to 'sport' in general. So in my opinion, it is very important to nurture relationships with journalists in the media on a day-to-day basis. Nowadays everything is very quick, information travels fast. So it's important to build positive relationships with the media and not always push them away and see them as an enemy."*

The difficulty facing sports organisations become particularly evident during periods of war and international conflict. According to Boykoff (2016), the Olympics highlights the multitude of ways that sport and politics mix together. '[The IOC's] supposed aversion to politics has always

brimmed with hypocrisy' (2). These difficulties are faced head-on by communications staff and public relations workers at Olympic organisations. Operating on the frontline, these individuals confront the task of communicating the IOC's stance on complex political issues such as banning athletes, or entire nations, due to international conflict. The present conflict between Russia and Ukraine and the subsequent decision to include or omit Russian and Belarussian athletes ahead of the 2024 Paris Olympics highlighted the complex ways the IOC has to navigate its public statements via the media (Nieland 2024). Participants said the role of communications staff responsible for drafting press releases, responding to journalists' questions and facilitating press conferences, is heightened. A media manager who works for a European-based Olympic organisation, explained:

> *"The mixture of sport and politics in recent years has made our jobs more difficult. One of the most difficult aspects of my job this year has been the war in Ukraine and the situation with the Russian and Belarussian athletes. Our aim is always to keep sport neutral from politics and war, but we had to adapt to these new circumstances. Our main goal was the integrity of the sports competitions and protecting the athletes. This led us to very extraordinary decisions, which were not easy. We had to face them with the media. Times have changed, and in this sense, we are seeing a very new situation coming forward for media managers."*

This final point by the participant points to the changing nature of the role fulfilled by communications staff at sports organisations. It also highlights the difficult task faced by the IOC dealing with sports journalists from a range of different countries, with contrasting values, cultures, and media ecosystems. This is particularly pronounced during periods of international conflict, when calls to exclude nations from the Olympics and ban athletes for support of a regime gain prominence. How the IOC manages media members in different parts of the world differs significantly. Language barriers, issues of translation, press censorship, and the reality that smaller countries do not have enough sports journalists to report on the Olympics robustly, all contribute to the increased difficulty faced by the IOC communications department. The IOC tasks itself with making an equal effort to maintain positive relationships with sports journalists all over the world. Modern conflicts, such as in Ukraine and Gaza, have significantly complicated the work of media

and communications staff at the IOC (Nieland 2024). Fans, athletes and journalists demand public statements from the IOC during times of crisis. According to one media manager, trying to maintain political neutrality and navigating international crises via information given to the media has become "more difficult than at any point in history" for sports organisations. Participants illustrated that at a time when greater demands are being made of sports organisations to be politically engaged (in spite of their reluctance to do so) the importance of exerting control over media narratives is heightened for the IOC.

4.5 Marriage of Convenience: An adversarial, symbiotic relationship

(i) Adversarial yet symbiotic dynamic

After examining sports journalists and the IOC individually, the fourth and final theme in this chapter synthesises the opposing perspectives of these two entities to provide a more comprehensive and precise outline of their relationship. The following section uses participants' answers to describe how their association is both adversarial and symbiotic. Later in this final theme I also discuss the concept of "hierarchy", which is how different journalists are treated by the IOC depending on their status and usefulness. This finding builds on the 'Olympics mafia' concept previously identified by Robertson (2024, 91), which alludes to a small cohort of journalists who are treated more favourably. I conclude this final theme by presenting participants' views of how the IOC's relationship with journalists has changed over recent decades and the reasons why their relationship has deteriorated. To begin, participants explained that one of the most accurate ways to describe dynamics between the IOC and sports journalists was that the two parties had an adversarial association. Although this characterization might suggest an entirely negative relationship between the IOC and journalists, participants did not perceive it in such terms. Rather, they explained that it is not only natural, but in fact "healthy" for sports organisations, teams and athletes to have a combative relationship with the media that covers them. A participant who works for the IOC's media department explained:

> *"Clearly there are going to be times where things bubble over. But that happens in any healthy relationship. We realise that they (the media) need something, we're trying to get it for them. But sometimes we can't get the information quickly enough and that naturally*

creates friction. But it's never friction that lasts. Everybody understands that, in the heat of the moment, things take time. But I hope the media knows that we are doing our best to deliver for them."

For the purposes of this study, I define adversarial in the context of adversarial journalism. This is journalism that, according to Eriksson and Östman (2013), sees its purpose as holding powerful individuals and institutions to account by asking difficult questions. "Holding feet to the fire," as one Irish Examiner sports journalist explained. He argued that this type of journalism is significant so that checks and balances are kept and a democratic society can ensure a free press which is not censored or suppressed. Blumler and Gurevitch (1995) state that adversarial journalism 'accentuates the professional roles and clashing professional objectives' (27) of journalists and the individuals they report on. A former Olympian who now works in American media said: "You still need independent coverage of the Olympics. It's the same reason you need a free press in any democratic country." IOC officials said there would be no benefit of attempting to suppress or "gag" voices in the media. An IOC press officer bluntly said doing so "would reflect badly on us." A Daily Telegraph sports writer added: "The IOC don't really kick out journalists. They do get to decide who gets access, yes. If you are an awkward customer, they can decide to refuse your press accreditation, but the IOC don't tend to ever do that."

From the IOC's perspective, they perceive having an adversarial relationship with the media as necessary. An IOC media director said: "We're trying our best at the IOC press office. Not all of them [journalists] like me. But that's just the nature of the beast." IOC participants said all of their decision-making and engagements with the media work towards staging a successful Games and achieving a positive image of the organisation. A participant who worked for Olympic-focussed news website *InsideTheGames* explained: "They are afraid of negative coverage getting out about them. They want all coverage to show the IOC in a good light." Sports journalists described their objective as reporting "unbiased, impartial coverage" of the Olympics which serves their audiences, readers, viewers and listeners first and foremost. Upon examining these two distinct objectives, it becomes evident that an inherent clash exists between what the IOC wants to project and interests pursued by the media. As a result of this, a strained relationship between the IOC and

sports journalists manifests. One participant, who has been reporting on the IOC since the 1980s, summarised the relationship:

> *"I think the IOC's relationship is somewhere in-between the two (friendly and critical), as it should be. It should never be super friendly, and it's actually okay if there is a fractured relationship between the IOC and journalists, because that means we (the media) are doing our job. I don't want or need to be friends with them. I've got friends and my job is being a journalist."*

Another veteran American Olympics journalist said they "relished" the opportunity to openly criticise the IOC when it is necessary to do so:

> *"Frankly, I want it to be an adversarial relationship. And it is. And it always will be. I was on CNN yesterday talking about FIFA and the Women's World Cup. I said that the racist and sexist world of FIFA is only topped by that of the IOC. That was broadcast live on CNN and I'm sure they (the IOC) all saw that. So, in my opinion, the relationship shouldn't be friendly. And certainly in the case of a group like this (the IOC), who is so worthy of criticism. It's very, very hard to be friendly, nor should you be."*

These descriptions underscore that, from the perspective of both parties, it is not the responsibility of the IOC to fulfil or accommodate the media's watchdog role. Nor is it the role of a free and independent media to "be the IOC's mouthpiece", as one ESPN sports writer characterised the relationship. However, a recurring discussion point that emerged from interviews was the characterisation of the relationship between the IOC and sports journalists as being "symbiotic." Borrowing from Nicholson, Kerr, and Sherwood (2015), they state that: 'professional sport and the media have historically shared a mutually beneficial relationship' (513). The IOC offers value to journalists by granting accreditation to attend events, bestowing access to interview athletes, coaches and officials and by selling TV rights to broadcast their events. Sports journalists offer value to the IOC through positive media coverage. A former IOC communications staff member said understanding this symbiotic relationship was key to understanding how the IOC operates:

"It's very easy when you start covering the Olympic world as a journalist to be snarky and cynical. I totally get it. But the IOC runs on relationships. I'm not saying anything nefarious, I'm not saying there's bribery and skulduggery [between journalists and the IOC]. The key to understanding how the IOC works is that people have to trust each other, because you're working across cultures and languages. If journalists can slow down, take a deep breath and recognize that not everything is corrupt, that would go a long way."

Sherwood et al. (2016) outline that 'in this partnership, media have relied on sport content to provide high ratings and sports organisations utilised the media's reach to communicate with fans' (514). A Guardian sports journalist who covered the IOC for over 20 years agreed with this description, explaining that media relations is a long-term game. Granting access for an interview "in the short-term" benefits a sports journalist, however the IOC can later call on that sports journalist for "a favour" later on if the need arises. This observation highlights the power balance and leverage that ebbs and flows between the IOC and sports journalists. A Digital Communications manager for the British Olympic Association (also known as Team GB), said in his experience journalists and sports organisations "can happily co-exist together." He said that competition for stories, clicks and content does exist, but there is space for all parties to do their jobs. He described this coexistence as "healthy competition" between those who work in-house and those who work for independent media outlets:

"I would say they do co-exist. Particularly in the Olympic world, journalists are incredibly supportive and friendly. They are looking to tell positive stories. Thankfully, Team GB have lots of those in recent times, so telling those positive stories has been quite easy for them. In our world, journalists happily coexist with us as sports organisations."

A difficulty which some participants noted are the limitations of this symbiotic relationship, especially relating to the issue of access and gatekeeping. As the gatekeeper that decides which journalists receive accreditation and credentials, the IOC can choose who is present at press conferences and mixed zones and what questions are selected at these media gatherings. Participants said this impacts the behaviour of journalists. Participants intimated that journalists may feel pressured to work in a way which benefits the IOC and produce content that is favourable

towards them. Not doing so means a journalist could risk losing their access and accreditation. A sports journalist for The Times explained: "The more that sports journalism has evolved towards taking on questions of power and politics, the stakes increase. And the dynamics kick into gear in terms of access. That's what powerful people do: they can limit the media's access." A sports journalist for Deutsche Welle in Germany agreed with this view, stating: "The IOC still needs the media for *credibility*." This observation summarises the important role which legacy media plays for the IOC, who subtly co-opt their reputation and the trust they have built from audiences. By obtaining positive media coverage from objective, impartial journalists, the IOC leverages this credibility, thereby enhancing its own reputation as a result.

(ii) Hierarchy: Olympics mafia & self-policing

Participants were keen to emphasise the different treatment of media professionals by the IOC depending on which media outlet or publication they work for. Interviewees highlighted the existence of a "pecking order" for the media at the Olympics. An Associated Press journalist aptly labelled it as a "hierarchy" of media at the Games. This issue primarily concerns TV rights holders and how they often receive, in the words of one BBC broadcaster, "preferential treatment". This pertains to sports journalists employed by TV companies and streaming services that pay the IOC substantial fees to broadcast the Olympics on their channels. TV revenue is crucial for the IOC to sustain itself. According to Solberg and Gratton (2013): 'Television has become the engine that has driven the financial growth of the Olympic Movement and raised its profile exponentially' (147). Writing about the fundamental role of TV coverage to the success of the Olympics, Peña (2009) observed that 'communication-related revenue (broadcast rights and sponsorship) accounts for 85% of the Olympic Movement's total income' (1,000).

Participants who work for such TV rights-holding channels, including the BBC in the UK, NBC in the United States, RTÉ in the Republic of Ireland and the IOC-run Olympic Media Channel, all said the level of access they were granted by the IOC was significantly better than sports journalists who did not work for rights holders. Those who have reported at the Olympics for a TV rights holder explained that they received preferential treatment and more substantial access than many of their colleagues. These colleagues work for print newspapers, online websites, blogs and radio stations. This manifested in various ways, such as being among the first journalists to interview an

athlete immediately after an event at an Olympic Games. It also included having access to speak to top athletes in the build-up to races, and being granted one-on-one interviews with prominent IOC and Olympic officials when required. A former BBC Olympic correspondent said:

> *"Working for a rights holder like the BBC is a massive advantage at the Olympic Games. You get much more access at things like mixed zones. At the athletics track, the BBC will probably be the third person to speak to someone like Usain Bolt after a race, after the host's own broadcaster and NBC. The BBC gets incredible access to the athletes at the Olympics."*

The same interviewee went on to describe how the level of access granted to journalists and commentators who work directly for state broadcasters at an Olympic Games is "even greater." He explained that while TV rights holders are granted permission to conduct exclusive interviews with high-profile athletes and officials, the level of access given to the host nation's state broadcaster is "unprecedented" compared to newspapers, or non-rights holding TV channels.

> *"Since I left the BBC and went freelance, I have also worked at the Olympics for the host's broadcaster [8] too and that's another level. When you compare the level of access that the host broadcaster gets, compared to a TV right's holder like the BBC, it's amazing, even better. There are different levels depending on who you're working for. For me, working for the BBC and then the host broadcasters, I could never complain about access. My other colleagues, from places like Sky News or CNN, they were literally locked out of the Olympic venues a lot of the time."*

Participants indicated that these factors exert a substantial influence on the relationship between journalists and the IOC. Asked how the IOC treated members of the media, one freelance Olympics journalist stated: "My impression is that it differs based on the medium. TV companies are paying them (the IOC), and some TV journalists have to remain quiet in terms of their criticism of the IOC because of that. Print journalists, I think the IOC consider them a bit of a nuisance. Often,

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[8] Note: the interviewee means they worked for the state broadcaster of the country which was hosting the Olympics at the time. Examples include Brazil in 2016 and Japan in 2021.

they do what the IOC considers 'mischief making'. They produce stories that they would prefer not be reported." Participants insinuated that because rights-holding sports journalists are treated more favourably and given more access, there is the possibility that their coverage and reportage will be more sympathetic and favourable. An Irish Times sports writer said it is "only natural" that work produced by a sports journalist who works for a rights-holding media company, which has paid millions to broadcast the Olympics, will be "more favourable and less critical" of the IOC. Another participant, who works as a TV broadcaster, said the BBC has received criticism for failing to provide sufficiently critical and robust coverage of the Olympics. However, he agreed that this was to be expected "due to their financial commitment" in broadcasting the Games:

> *"When the BBC goes to the Olympic Games, the resources they put in terms of manpower, studios in the various venues… the financial commitment by them is massive. There has been criticism that the BBC have turned a blind eye to some of those issues [doping, bribery, corruption]. Maybe that comes back to the fact that they're making such a financial commitment and making such a big show of this. They don't want to piss on their own parade, for want of a better word. They don't want to be a downer on the Olympics, when there's so much good stuff happening."*

While maintaining journalistic duties, other sports journalists who work for broadcast rights holders acknowledged a need to be cautious about being "overly critical" in their coverage. One participant, who works as a freelance broadcast sports journalist for different TV channels in the United States, explained:

> *"In my situation, I sometimes have to be quite careful in the questions I ask. I could be doing work for a sports governing body and — while they have never 'wrapped me on the knuckles' for any work I have done — when you're working for them, you're conscious that you don't want to be stirring the pot too much."*

These participants who work for TV rights holders said they had to be "more sensitive" in their work than colleagues who worked for publications who enjoy more independence. For print newspapers, such as The Guardian and The New York Times, access is not dependent on paying

the IOC to broadcast the Olympics. Another participant, who worked as an athletics commentator for the IOC's official broadcasting service at the Summer Games in 2021, said he felt compelled to self-moderate during his work:

> *"In Tokyo, I was working for OBS, the Olympic Broadcasting Service, which comes under the IOC umbrella. It's the in-house World Feed broadcaster. I almost felt like I was playing on their team [the IOC] in Tokyo. There were differences in terms of things you could say and maybe things you couldn't say. You have to play ball a little bit if you're broadcasting for OBS. You can't be critical of the organisation of the Games. You can't be critical of officials, referees, umpires, that kind of thing. So you are slightly hamstrung."*

Participants explained that these circumstances not only highlight how working for independent media outlets brings a greater degree of freedom in terms of what journalists can write and report about the Games. They said it also highlights the internal conflict faced by journalists who work for multiple outlets, both independent media and in-house for sports organisations. This point was repeated in several interviews and points to an inequality in the treatment of sports journalists by the IOC. As one veteran Olympics correspondent explained: "I think the IOC probably has a few favourites that they spend extra time with." It also underscores the difficulty faced by journalists who wish to maintain their independence and objectivity, but struggle to do so when producing work in-house, knowing they must self-censor. One participant, a sports broadcaster for RTÉ in Ireland, said colleagues in the written press do have more freedom and independence to be critical in their coverage, when compared to TV rights holders:

> *"I'm thinking of someone like NBC, just the amount of money they pay for the rights. Also the amount of money they commit to the production of their coverage. They're probably less inclined [to be critical of the Games and the IOC]. That would be my experience. The written press is in a much easier situation because they're not paying these multi-billion dollar rights fees. Take an issue like human rights in China around the Beijing Olympics[9].*

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[9] Media coverage surrounding the 2022 Winter Olympics, held in Beijing, was dominated by allegations of human rights abuses in relation to the detention of millions of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim minorities based in China's western Xinjiang region.

It's easier for them [the written media] to sit back and say: 'look, this isn't right.' It's less easy for the broadcaster. But maybe I'm copping out… because I'm a broadcaster myself."

Several freelance journalists who report on the Olympics said they undertake a combination of work for multiple outlets. They acknowledged that working for sports organisations, and for TV rights holders, brings a deeper level of access and, foremost, the opportunity to attend the Games. However, they said this type of reporting contains "limitations" and causes "conflicts of interest", all of which sports journalists are cognisant of and often struggle to rationalise. Responses from participants showed that the ability of a sports journalist to maintain independence, objectivity and credibility in their work is questioned when they also produce in-house work for sports organisations. A Daily Telegraph sports journalist said this issue highlights the "power struggle" that exists between organisations such as the IOC and journalists. He said the IOC has the ability to grant access and can "give journalists opportunities to work on exciting events." Discussing the difficulty of gaining press credentials to attend the Olympics, a TV broadcast journalist added: "It's quite limited in the numbers of who gets accredited and who doesn't." Obtaining this gilded access comes with conditions and limitations for journalists, who must agree to a trade-off in terms of their ability to scrutinise and be critical of the events they are reporting on. Participants said this highlights the importance of independence for journalists in their work. It also underscores the power of sports organisations to decide who receives what level of access. Ultimately, it demonstrates the ways in which a hierarchy and a pecking order exists between different journalists who report on the Olympics.

A sports journalist for ESPN said he feels the IOC does have an "inner circle" of journalists who it can "depend on" for more favourable coverage. He said that in return, the IOC has the ability to grant interviews, heightened access and more favourable treatment to said journalists. Echoing previous observations by Robertson (2024) who labelled this cohort as a potential 'Olympic mafia' (91), this participant said such journalists formulate their professional identity around being "veteran Olympic journalists" who "turn up at every Games." Another experienced Olympics reporter said there are different levels of access and treatment. However, he said positive treatment was "earned" based on decades of work which was respected by the IOC, even when reporting was highly critical of the organisation.

"For me it's super easy. I can call up the IOC press office. I say 'hey I have a question.' They're like sure, no problem. And that is based on the respect they have for my body of work. As a journalist, you have a reputation. You know the right questions to ask. A lot of journalists they deal with might be jokers. The fact is, I've got 25 years of history with the IOC. As much as I've criticised them, my criticisms are never personal or malicious. They respect my work."

Another veteran Olympics correspondent, when discussing the concept of hierarchy and a pecking order, said: "There are a number of journalists that the IOC fundamentally respect. I think there's a group of maybe 15 or 20 of us that they truly trust, even if they don't agree with us all the time. We are critical but fair in our reporting. The IOC recognises that everyone in a democratic society has a right to do and say what they want." A BBC sports writer agreed with this view, but said the difficulty facing media officers going forward is deciding which outlets "deserve" preferential treatment and who can be trusted. "In terms of the accreditation process [allocating press passes]… the IOC have got to be more open to which media they accredit, *why* and *how*. They're not just going to be accrediting, you know, the New York Times or the BBC or whatever. They have to look at other organisations and weigh them and assess their credibility. Who's credible and who's not, it's a real struggle nowadays for media officers." These insights highlight how journalists are treated differently by the IOC depending on who they work for and their usefulness. These findings echo Jennings' (2012) assertion that there is a 'private club of sports reporters who write about the Olympics' (25). This raises important questions as to the credibility and legitimacy of Olympic reporting by such journalists, who may act in a way which will grant them more access.

Findings also highlight the existence of *self-policing* within the press pack which covers the Olympics. Sports journalists admitted that the opinions of fellow journalists had an unconscious impact on their reporting. A veteran Olympic journalist for The Daily Telegraph said there was a tendency for members of the media to "look out for each other". They attend the same events, stay at the same hotels and room together, share quotes, offer ideas, give feedback and offer constructive criticism. All of which he said "makes you appreciate your colleagues." Younger Olympic journalists interviewed said they sometimes felt self-conscious, not wanting to impede

on older, more experienced colleagues. This idea of self-policing is particularly evident at the Olympic Games in terms of questioning narratives and raising difficult questions. For example, raising an allegation of doping after an athlete had just won a gold medal. An online sportswriter for RTÉ said: "I have heard colleagues getting negative feedback [from other journalists] in terms of, *'oh, we were very surprised you asked that'*, or *'such and such isn't happy that you asked that.'"*

Journalists value the opinion of their colleagues and take into consideration how their work will be interpreted by other members of the press pack. Similarly, if a journalist is unhappy with a colleague's work, or their line of questioning, there are instances where this frustration will impact future reporting. A sports journalist for The Daily Telegraph said some colleagues "wouldn't be very impressed" if a younger journalist asked a difficult or controversial question out of turn. Another sportswriter for The Times UK said the concept of self-policing within sports journalism was "a very delicate thing to talk about." He explained that younger colleagues did not want to "step on the toes" of respected journalists who had covered multiple Olympic Games. He said there was an unspoken code of behaviour that dictates which questions get asked at an Olympics and how the IOC are framed. These findings align with Robertson (2024), who found that: 'Journalists whose articles did ask more fundamental questions of the Olympics project received pushback from colleagues' (91).

(iii) The IOC and journalists: deterioration of their relationship

This final section presents participants' insights into how and why the IOC's relationship with journalists has changed over time. Participants in this study were chosen as a mixture of older, veteran Olympic journalists (dating back to the 1970s), current journalists, as well as current and ex-IOC staff members. This choice was deliberately made to illustrate the two parties' historical dynamics and its present state. During interviews, it became clear that the IOC previously enjoyed a more open, engaged relationship with journalists. Over recent decades their relationship has become increasingly more suspicious and guarded. One journalist for The Guardian described their current relationship as "strained" and said that "distance has opened up", with the IOC now viewing journalists with "more reservation and scepticism." This outlook offers an explanation for how and why the IOC applies the defensive mediatization strategies described earlier and which

will be analysed in further depth in the next chapter of this study. It is necessary to reiterate that findings presented here are limited to this period of the last five decades. One participant, a former IOC marketing director, said when he first joined the organisation in the 1980s the IOC was near bankruptcy. He said it was his role to help rejuvenate its public perception and journalists played a central role in this process of image repair:

> *"At this time, no cities even wanted to host the Games. Most of the commentators were writing the obituary of the Olympic Games. They were saying, you know, great event over the course of the 20th century, but we've become too big, too political. At this time the IOC was super small, just 25 people working at our offices in Lausanne. We turned the Olympics around from what was effective bankruptcy in the 1980s to the billion dollar business and brand it is today. And one of the first elements in that turnaround was working out the relationship with the media and broadcasters."*

This former IOC staff member said this was important to take into account because it emphasises the IOC's reliance on journalists to "generate positive coverage." In an era before the possibility of in-house digital content and vast communications teams, the IOC depended significantly more on journalists. This was heightened by the organisation's precarious financial position during the 1980s thanks to tumultuous political boycotts of the 1980 Moscow Olympics and 1984 Los Angeles Games. As such, in previous decades the IOC had more impetus for accommodating journalists, letting them in and offering higher levels of access than today. Adding to this view, another former IOC communications official said that the organisation "could not afford to have too many enemies in the press." This meant viewing journalists as an ally to be accommodated so that, in turn, their work could aid the IOC and improve its perception in the public domain.

Sports journalists agreed that throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, this meant more access for them. Attending IOC Sessions, networking in hotel lobbies, interviewing officials face-to-face, getting tips and off-the-record information in bars and over coffee was all common practice. A New York Times journalist said: "I would cover all the IOC Sessions. You get to know them and they're available in these hotels where they have these meetings. You could easily walk up to people and get comments and interviews." A former IOC staff member said they would actively

encourage journalists to attend their meetings and treat them with professionalism and respect. "With the journalists, there was a core Olympic rat pack of maybe 20, 25, who turned up at every Olympic board meeting to report on the news. They would be in the hotel lobby having a coffee with me, with Dick Pound [former IOC vice-president] and they got a lot of background information, context, a lot of perspective." Over time, however, the informal nature of the relationship between the IOC and sports journalists broke down. Participants said the IOC's reliance on journalists lessened. One veteran Olympics correspondent said increased scepticism of external media grew as the IOC "found its feet again" and grew in power and prestige throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Multi-million dollar broadcast deals brokered from the 1980s onwards helped to reinvent the IOC (Payne 2006). This coincided with a weakening position of journalists, meaning the organisation had less use for them and therefore applied more restrictions on their access in recent years. The former IOC marketing director said today's sports editors cannot justify sending reporters to Switzerland to cover IOC meetings like before:

"Nowadays the only real access that the journalists have is driven by technology and budgets. The editors of the newspapers are saying, why do I need to send you off to Lausanne? You can just as easily dial into this IOC meeting on Zoom. So the journalists get the official line, but they don't get any context like the old days. The only way you get context is, frankly, by sitting down and having a coffee with people."

Another veteran Olympics journalist for *AroundTheRings* agreed with this viewpoint, stating:

"The first IOC Session I covered was 1990 and let me just say this: there's a big difference in the amount of attention the IOC gets today versus then. When I started covering the IOC it was because Atlanta was bidding for the Olympics. Public enthusiasm was huge. We were looking at 400, sometimes 500 journalists coming to cover IOC Sessions. It got all that attention because there was intrigue and controversy and drama over who would win these bids. It's completely different now. The bidding process is less dramatic, which is how the IOC likes it. More private."

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Participants explained that the IOC has become a much more subdued organisation in its dealings with journalists, using words like "quiet" and "private" to describe its media relations. They explained that today the organisation's priorities are to "avoid controversy." One ESPN journalist said this is achieved by limiting engagements with journalists "to a bare minimum" explaining that the IOC always weighs up "risk versus reward" when choosing its interactions with media. Other participants explained that an important consideration when discussing the evolution of the IOC's relationship with journalists has been the organisation's financial growth since the turn of the century. This expansion extends to its communications and media staff, which is significantly greater than before (Peña 2024). The increased number of press officers, communications staff, public relations officials and social media teams means the IOC can more effectively manage journalists. A sports journalist for *AroundtheRings* said:

"They're very ordered at the IOC press office, very process-oriented. They get hundreds of email requests every single day. As a journalist, you make a request, they follow it up, they will find somebody to talk to you. They were constrained in the past by having a small press operation for the size of the Olympics, for the amount of money that goes through there, for the complexity and the high-profile nature of the IOC. I think the media staff was not up to what it needed to be in terms of numbers. I mean, 30 years ago, it was just two, three people in their media office. It was just not suitable. Nowadays their press operation is huge. It's sophisticated and professional."

Over time, the trust between journalists and IOC officials has eroded. Several participants said this distance was intentional and purposeful by the IOC, who view the media with more scepticism than previous decades. Building personal relationships is more difficult for journalists. The ability to conduct on the ground, face-to-face reporting has become more scarce than before. Remote reporting is a cost-effective way for newsrooms to avoid the expense of sending reporters abroad to cover the Olympic beat. Participants explained that the recent upsurge in remote reporting was having a detrimental impact on the quality of sports reporting on the Olympic Movement. They said this "plays into the hands" of the IOC. Participants said the reason for this scepticism towards the media was due to the IOC wishing to "remain on message". This means only communicating with the media via statements made by the IOC President, or the IOC's official spokesperson. The

ability for the media to interview other IOC figures was now at a minimum. As a result, dissenting voices from within the IOC are minimised. Some other participants dismissed the idea of the IOC lacking transparency, saying that it was "laziness" of the part of sports journalists who wanted the IOC to "do their work for them": A UK sports journalist explained this viewpoint:

> *"I think it's a slightly lazy expression to say there is a lack of transparency with the IOC and their dealings with the media nowadays. In terms of financial transparency, which is my speciality, there is quite a lot of information out there about the IOC. More than most journalists actually appreciate. The IOC are not totally transparent by any means. But if you try and understand the way it works, there is a lot of information out there. You don't need their media team to help you structure your piece. There is no organisation in the world quite like the IOC. So you need to take the time to figure out how they work. At the end of the day, it doesn't matter what the IOC thinks about us journalists. We don't work for them."*

A Guardian sports journalist said he and his colleagues needed to be guarded about the level of "stage-managed" access granted to them compared to the past. Recalling his experiences at the last four Olympic Games, he said the level of access granted by the IOC was sufficient, but he was sensitive to the type of access being granted, cognizant about being shown a positive version of events "which the IOC wanted to showcase to the world." He elaborated on this viewpoint:

> *"Access at Tokyo was pretty good. But there's two elements to that: the official stuff which the IOC facilitates, mixed zones, press conferences. But it's carefully stage-managed. The media management for the teams were very good, they're good about looking after you. But again, it's stage-managed in a way to be very focused on the sport and not so much on the bigger picture."*

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the four key themes that emerged from interviews conducted in this study: Olympic journalists' professional ideology, mediatization strategies, the IOC's motivations

for engaging with journalists, and the adversarial/symbiotic nature of their relationship. Through thematic analysis, these empirical findings provide a foundational basis for understanding the complex dynamics at play between the two parties. Discussion with 50 participants revealed a clearer understanding for how the IOC and sports journalists adapt to one another, but also inhibit and obstruct each other too. These findings provide a deeper insight into the motivations behind why the IOC and sports journalists interact. Participants used specific terms to describe relations between the IOC and journalists, namely that it is professional, adversarial and also symbiotic. However, more recent years have witnessed a strain on their relationship, which has been characterised by increasing scepticism and distrust. Sports journalists accused the IOC of lacking transparency, using terms such as "Stalinist", "Politburo" and "propaganda" to describe its efforts to suppress negative media coverage. IOC officials on the one hand expressed their admiration and respect for the work produced by certain journalists. However, they also shared their frustration with "sloppy journalism" and "unfair, inaccurate coverage" which has driven them towards more cautious and restrictive media strategies. As such, these findings align with Peña's (2024) assertion that the IOC's communications strategy has evolved 'from the fragmentation of platforms, actors, and organisations to a clear trend towards [internal] convergence and unity' (2). What these new findings make clear is the unique position of the IOC as a sports organisation and how its history, development, institutional structures, practices and workplace culture have a significant impact on its dealings with journalists. Unlike other sports organisations, the IOC's exclusive media partnerships, controlled access, strict media policies, global reach and consistent focus on positive coverage to preserve the Olympic brand distinguish it as unique.

Findings highlight that due to these factors, the IOC has considerable control to dictate the environment where journalism takes place and firmly establishes terms and conditions for these media producers. Participants illustrated how the IOC's engagement with journalists is increasingly driven by self-preservation and reducing reputational damage. Participants argued that due to the IOC's autonomy, wealth and insular nature, it can establish a controlled media environment where the work of journalists is leveraged for positive gain. Similarly, these institutional characteristics means negative and critical coverage of the IOC by journalists has less impact. This is compounded by the decreasing number of Olympic journalists available on account of precarious and challenging working conditions within the sports media industry more broadly

today. These findings build on previous studies which have examined the working relationships between journalists and sports organisations. In the next chapter, the theoretical implications, discussion and analysis of these findings will be outlined while linking to the existing literature. By synthesising these empirical findings and theoretical insights with a concerted focus on defensive mediatization, Chapter 5 will elucidate key fault lines in the working relationships between the IOC and sports journalists.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Analysis

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a detailed discussion and analysis of the study's findings. The objective of this section of the dissertation is to bring together the existing literature and theoretical frameworks alongside its original contribution. By synthesising the current body of scholarly work within the fields of mediatization, Olympic studies and sports journalism with new data uncovered through this study in relation to the International Olympic Committee (IOC), this chapter seeks to provide an in-depth interpretation, contextualisation and evaluation of its findings. It builds on Robertson's (2024) recent investigation into the motivations of Olympic journalists and responds to her call for 'further research that explores Olympic journalism by paying attention to its producers' (94).

Providing a higher order analysis of the empirical data gathered, this chapter also responds to Frandsen's (2020) call for further mediatization research which examines international sports organisations, doing so by uniquely focussing on the application of defensive mediatization strategies. By synthesising the previous chapter's empirical findings alongside existing theoretical insights, I aim to elucidate key fault lines in the working relationships between the IOC and sports journalists. This chapter's central objective is to extend our understanding of mediatization by providing new evidence differentiating between offensive and defensive strategies. This is achieved by presenting a synchronic portrait of present-day practices, strategies and routines. This study's central research questions concern how today's sports journalists report on organisations such as the IOC, what purpose sports organisations still have for traditional media, and the challenges faced by journalists reporting on the biggest sports event in the world. As noted by Nölleke et al. (2021), the development of mediatization is only possible 'by distinguishing defensive from offensive adaptations' (739).

This chapter therefore sheds light on how modern sports journalists tackle the difficulty of reporting on an organisation which they depend on for access given the limitations imposed upon them by defensive mediatization. It aims to provide new insights into why sports organisations still accommodate traditional media such as newspaper writers, sports columnists and online

reporters who do not work for rights-holding media companies. I aim to illustrate how the IOC and journalists are, as Hjarvard (2013) describes the ongoing process of mediatization, 'simultaneously embedded and interdependent' (8). Ultimately this chapter offers a conceptual vision of what the press boxes, press conferences, media briefings and mixed zones of the future may look like for the largest sporting event in the world. It provides a discussion about the impact of defensive mediatization strategies across the macro, meso and micro levels and discusses ways journalists seek to combat them. It adds a new contribution to these discussions with the addition of a fourth category of defensive mediatization, labelled 'steering', while contributing new empirical evidence to the existing strategies of persistence, shielding and immunization.

5.2 Offensive Mediatization

The distinction between offensive and defensive mediatization has been alluded to in some literature (Donges 2005; Strömbäck and Van Aelst 2013; Landerer 2014; Meyen et al. 2014; Marcinkowski, 2014), but the explicit differentiation has been widely neglected. Recent critiques of mediatization have suggested that it is inaccurate and misleading to declare that organisations simply seek or avoid media attention (D'Angelo et al. 2014; Deacon and Stanyer 2014; Marcinkowski 2014). Rather, organisations coordinate media activities to *manage* public attention in a nuanced manner which 'maximize benefits and minimize disadvantages' (Nölleke et al. 2021, 740). This means organisations deploy both offensive and defensive strategies together. This argument posits that these opposite approaches do fundamentally follow the same central logic (Altheide and Snow 1979) built upon two key assumptions: firstly, that the media has the power to influence public attention and secondly, that public attention is a valuable resource.

To illustrate this point in the context of this study, it is necessary to analyse how and why the IOC implements offensive and defensive mediatization. It is essential to differentiate these two concepts in order to provide clarity and emphasise mediatization's theoretical potential. By doing so, we can identify the full spectrum of indirect structural media effects that mediatization theory aims to apprehend. These various strategies implemented by the IOC were initially described by participants in Chapter 4, but will now be categorised and analysed in this chapter using Nölleke et al.'s (2021) existing framework. This study contends that the IOC has gravitated towards a more conservative and restrictive approach to journalists and consequently the two parties' relationship has deteriorated. However, before I can begin to categorise defensive mediatization across the

macro, meso and micro levels (which is the focus of this chapter) I firstly address offensive mediatization. This occurs where organisations reflect upon journalistic demands (Cohen et al. 2008) and consequently develop tactics to attract their attention and achieve public visibility (Elmelund-Præstekær et al. 2011; Peleg and Bogoch 2012; Marcinkowski et al. 2014).

Previous studies have identified three main drivers behind the pursuit of offensive mediatization: organisations view their media visibility as insufficient; they perceive themselves as inappropriately covered by the media; the design of offensive strategies is informed and driven by an internal understanding of journalism (Nölleke et al. 2021). This study found little evidence that the IOC applies offensive strategies because they view their media visibility as insufficient. Participants who work at the IOC said they are dissatisfied with the quality and accuracy of media coverage, rather than quantity. Findings demonstrate the IOC is in fact motivated by the perception that it is inappropriately covered. Participants described feeling annoyed, frustrated and disgruntled with inaccurate portrayals of the IOC. IOC officials suggested the public's misconception of its work was cultivated by "poor journalism". These individuals argued that the organisation is "unfairly saddled" with wider societal issues, such as climate change, military conflicts and transgender rights.

To manage these negative media narratives and combat this perceived unfair coverage, the IOC is driven towards offensive mediatization tactics. The IOC reasserts control by doing so, in order to meet their strategic objectives (Davis 2009; Ross 2010) which are to protect its public image, maintain the Olympic brand and uphold the organisation's global reputation among influential stakeholders. This also relates to the third motivation for offensive mediatization previously highlighted, which is an organisation's internal understanding of how journalism works (Landerer 2014; Sporer-Wagner and Marcinkowski 2014). Findings from this study show that a number of IOC staff members have a journalistic background. Many participants interviewed previously worked as sports reporters, broadcasters and journalists before transitioning into communications and public relations positions. Having worked as journalists, they said they understand the intricacies of the profession in terms of deadlines, embargos, being leaked stories, and off-the-record information. This knowledge of which stories are attractive to journalists manifests in the IOC staging and leveraging media events such as the Olympic Torch Relay and the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the Games. Similarly, the IOC platforms athletes with compelling stories

knowing that their inspirational achievements and life stories will be publicised by journalists seeking intriguing storylines (Flindall and Wassong 2017). These findings offer further evidence that offensive adaptations are driven by an organisation's internal understanding of journalism. This demonstrates that one's perception of media logic is a key driver, which aligns with Donges and Jarren's (2014) view that 'the first aspect of mediatization is perception' (189).

Sports journalists interviewed in this study argued, however, that there are clear differences in perception concerning the role of journalism when covering the IOC. While many IOC staff members are former journalists, they are still motivated by the organisation's objectives despite having an understanding of journalists' work. In this sense, findings concur with Nölleke et al.'s (2021) description that 'if media improve performance, actors strive to attract coverage by adapting *offensively'* (740). This shows that while offensive and defensive mediatization must be differentiated, they are still guided by the same central logic. Very often there is a complimentary overlap between offensive and defensive adaptations. As noted by Nölleke et al. (2021): 'Adaptations like establishing professional media relations can serve offensive and defensive purposes at the same time' (738). However, organisations implement both approaches in tandem with one another to increase performance and protect existing structures within social systems. The IOC reasserting control of its public image due to a dissatisfaction with media coverage emphasises Marcinkowski's (2014) view that mediatization 'defines the transition from a reactive to an *active* way of dealing with media logic' (8).

The IOC encourages media coverage by setting up press conferences, making officials and athletes available for interview and leaking off-the-record information to journalists on deep background. These instances of offensive mediatization concur with Strömbäck and Van Aelst's (2013) assertion that media publicity offers both opportunities and threats. It also aligns with Nölleke et al.'s (2021) conceptualization that mediatization strategies are complementary and located 'on a continuum between the two extremes' (738). Participants at the IOC emphasised the importance they place on influencing fans and powerful stakeholders, such as politicians and sponsors, via traditional media. They said they continue to accommodate journalists at respected publications such as the New York Times and the BBC because these stakeholders and sponsors read about the IOC and the Olympics via these news sources. As such, these findings correspond with Nölleke et al.'s (2021) view that sports organisations pursue offensive strategies to influence fans and

sponsors via media publicity. In this conceptualisation, they argue that 'mediatization is a means to achieve sporting success' (Nölleke et al. 2021, 741).

5.3 Significance of defensive mediatization at the IOC

In this study I argue that the relationship between journalists and the IOC has changed significantly in recent years resulting in a growing distrust between sports organisations and the media which report on them. Due to the rise of online media tools and social media platforms, a power balance has been tipped (Sherwood et al. 2016) meaning that sports organisations no-longer depend on journalists as before. Approaching from the institutionalist tradition of mediatization research (Strömbäck 2013), this study presents evidence that the key factor driving this change in their relationship has been the intentional implementation of different restrictive strategies by the IOC. These strategies, which were initially described in the previous chapter, aim to deflect from media attention instead of attracting it. I label these actions taken by the IOC as defensive mediatization strategies. They are specific actions and adaptations that serve to keep the media spotlight away from the IOC, neutralise scrutiny and create disincentives for the media (Strömbäck and Van Aelst 2013).

While some previous scholarship has *alluded* to the presence of defensive mediatization (Donges 2005; Strömbäck and Van Aelst 2013; Marcinkowski 2014) there is a pressing need for more studies that explicitly label these defensive strategies (Isotalus and Almonkari 2014; Birkner and Nölleke 2016). As argued by Nölleke et al. (2021) mediatization research has 'predominantly dealt with actors' efforts to offensively influence media coverage and shape it in favourable ways' (743). Much of the preceding academic literature examining mediatization in sport has focused on this aspect: accommodating the media in order to *gain and attract* as much positive attention as possible from the assembled journalists and broadcasters. However, this single focus omits the presence of an alternative, risk-averse type of adaptation, which is defensive mediatization. These are the tactics employed by the IOC to limit and deflect from media attention. The goal of this approach is to minimise exposure to journalists, in order to reduce negative consequences caused by media engagement. Nölleke et al. (2021) highlight the existence of defensive mediatization and

my study seeks to answer their call for more empirical research that draws attention to defensive strategies within organisations across the macro, meso and micro levels.

The motivations for employing defensive mediatization strategies, the types of strategies used, and the resulting consequences of these strategies for Olympic journalists are all discussed in the following sections of this chapter. As shown in the findings of this study, the presence of defensive mediatization is a fundamental aspect of conceptualising the relationship between the IOC and sports journalists. A key aspect of the findings from this study has been the *evolution* of the relationship between the IOC and sports journalists. This evolution has been characterised by a gradual (but intentional) restriction on access to the media, a sense of scepticism and mistrust between both parties and, crucially, a conscious effort by the IOC to centralise its messaging. This final point, *centralising its message*, is a clear example of defensive mediatization by the IOC which I discuss in this chapter. Not only does the IOC use the media to gain positive coverage of its events, but there are occasions when the IOC makes explicit decisions to keep the media at bay. Examples described by participants include denying interview requests, hiring in-house journalists, banning reporters from press conferences and threatening journalists with libel/defamation letters.

The objective of defensive mediatization strategies is to maintain existing power structures, avoid scandal and uphold a positive image of the organisation implementing them (MacAloon 2011; Nölleke et al. 2021). These strategies complicate the work of journalists, thereby causing a strain on their relationship with the IOC. With space opening up between them, distrust and scepticism grows. This perspective adds to previous research which examines the role of journalism in mediatization (Strömbäck 2011; Marcinkowski 2014; Strömbäck and Esser 2014; Kunelius and Reunanen 2016;). Journalists find it harder to report on the IOC because the IOC has successfully applied defensive mediatization strategies to impede them. This points towards evidence of organisations forcing their rules on others (Meyer 2002). My study shows that the IOC implements *both* offensive and defensive mediatization strategies in tandem, in order to attract media attention when desired (Davis 2009; Ross 2010) and to push journalists away depending on the circumstance.

In the next section of the study, I provide further discussion of these different defensive mediatization strategies across the three institutional levels: the macro level of social structures, the meso level of institutions and the micro level of individual actors (Meyen et al. 2014). This study builds on Nölleke, Scheu, and Birkner's (2021) framework, which distinguishes three different categories of defensive mediatization: persistence, shielding, and immunization. This study also highlights evidence of a fourth category, which locates itself between shielding and immunization, a category which is labelled *'steering'*. *Steering* contains similarities to shielding and immunization, but is unique as it refers to the ways in which organisations seek to 'guide the media towards desirable ends' (O'Boyle and Gallagher 2023, 671). In the following section I detail the consequences of each category of defensive mediazation (persistence, shielding, immunization) across the macro, meso, and micro institutional levels, before continuing into a discussion about this study's proposed new category of *steering*. The section finishes with a reflection on sports journalists' reaction to defensive mediatization and how they seek to combat these strategies which impede their ability to report on the IOC.

5.4 Persistence as a defensive mediatization strategy

(i) Macro level

Nölleke et al. (2021) state that persistence on the macro level involves 'social systems maintaining or strengthening established programs and norms, even though adaptations toward media logic promise advantages' (749). This study finds evidence of persistence at the macro level. Namely, the IOC persisting with the traditional use of media embargos for journalists, persisting with refusing journalists access into locker rooms to interview Olympians — in contrast to America's more open sports media culture (Kovacs and Doczi 2019) — and persistence with a pecking order which places a higher priority on journalists working for legacy media over newer platforms and online publications. This last example feeds into a broader scepticism towards online journalism (Hall 2001), that it lacks the credibility and principles of other formats (Kian and Zimmerman 2012). Persistence refers to the cultural norms that continue to be applied at organisations with regards to how it chooses to accommodate or distance itself from the media. Participants offered contrasting views on how the IOC remained an old-fashioned institution which remains wedded

to traditional means of dealing with the media. A sports journalist for The Associated Press commented: "[The IOC] is feudal, it's old, it's very traditional." Others disagreed and said that the IOC has modernised in recent years, as explained by a BBC sports broadcaster: "There's an understanding now [from the IOC] that they're in a business which the media helps sell, which puts bums on seats. There is a more open and cooperative attitude to media than before."

Sports journalists shared a frustration that the IOC was still wedded to an old-fashioned outlook which views sports journalists as a threat to their power, hence their application of defensive mediatization strategies. The IOC still persists with a number of traditional tactics, such as embargos for quotes. A sports editor for The Guardian said media managers can be "silly with embargos", which insist that journalists hold back stories until an agreed-upon time and date for publication. He said the practice was "outdated" in the modern world of social media where immediacy is a priority instead of abiding by archaic print newspaper deadlines. Participants also said the IOC's persistence with prioritising journalists who work for legacy media, instead of recognising journalists that work for newer publications, sports blogs and as online-only journalists (Hardin and Ashe 2011) was indicative of an old-fashioned approach. These sentiments suggest the IOC does resist a passive acceptance that 'the media colonize other social or cultural domains' (Hepp et al. 2015, 317).

A second example of persistence highlighted in this study's findings is the IOC's tactic of limiting journalists to one question at press conferences. Although this tactic overlaps as a micro level example of persistence, it similarly represents a macro level adaptation because it demonstrates the 'formal and informal norms' (Nölleke et al. 2021, 744) which act as points of orientation for individual actors within social systems. An online Olympics journalist for *InsideTheGames* said it continues to be an intentional strategy to prevent follow-up questions which constrains journalists in their ability to hold the IOC to account: "If you attend an IOC press conference as a journalist, you get one question. Yes, that's partly because of time constraints. But, crucially, you rarely get the chance to ask a follow-up question." Limiting journalists to one question gives IOC officials the opportunity to "filibuster". IOC officials can interpret a journalist's question in whatever way they wish, provide a response that may not actually answer the question, safe in the knowledge that a follow-up question will not arise from the reporter. The *InsideTheGames* reporter said: "In

the days of Samaranch (IOC President 1980-2001) he was a master of *deliberately misunderstanding* questions asked by journalists. He would give an answer to a question that hadn't been asked." A German investigative sports journalist said the reason the IOC persists with these old-fashioned media tactics was simply due to fear: "In the communications department [at the IOC], they are afraid of us."

A number of American participants contrasted the IOC's approach with a much more open sports media culture in the United States. They said an environment which allows sports journalists into locker rooms after NFL football games and NBA basketball games (Fortunato 2000) was the antithesis to the more conservative, measured, and sceptical European approach. According to a Washington Post sportswriter, American sports organisations "respect the role of the media to promote sport" and have a "show business mentality." These responses from participants align with Fortunato's (2000) description of American sports media relations, which aims to 'exploit and create as much access' (487) as possible for journalists. Many American athletes and Olympic officials acknowledge they have a responsibility to talk to journalists and this outlook permeates the practices and regulations of its sports media industry. This recognition informs their approach to media relations, viewing journalists as an asset to be accommodated. In contrast, participants said the IOC persists with an old-fashioned approach which views engagement with journalists as a potential liability. This is evidenced in the persistence of applying embargos, restricting access to Olympians, and limiting the number of questions allowed during press conferences.

These examples add further evidence to Nölleke et al.'s (2021) understanding of persistence. They posit that organisations continue with existing structures and regulations 'even if the media would prefer if they changed' (744). This was particularly evident when sports journalists described the IOC's reluctance to engage with online reporters and bloggers. The IOC have viewed these emerging new media actors with a heightened degree of suspicion. As a result, they were less likely to grant press credentials to media members who work for less established publications. This highlights the IOC's preference for journalists who work for legacy media publications, as well as journalists who are established in their careers instead of younger media members with less experience. These findings also demonstrate an intriguing contrast between the IOC's willingness to accommodate and embrace social media content and influencers, but maintain distance with

online news journalists. The reason for this distinction is due to the opposing professional objectives of these online media members and the status of their work. As argued by Swart et al. (2022): 'What is relevant, important and timely information [for] audiences does not automatically align with what is produced by professional journalists' (10).

The IOC views content creators and social media influencers as an asset upon which it can negotiate messaging and content, but perceives online journalists with more weariness due to their added levels of independence and impartiality. A consequence of this difference in perception is creating an environment between traditional media, online media and social media content creators who now 'compete (consciously or unconsciously) for legitimacy' (Perreault et al. 2024, 207). These findings emphasise that the IOC views engagement with less familiar media members as a potential threat. There are more benefits and less risks by adhering to existing structures and engaging with trusted journalists whose work they are familiar with. New online blogs, websites and social media platforms for producing Olympic-related content have created an increased demand for media credentials covering the Olympics. The IOC is limited in the number of journalists it can grant access to. As a result, despite actively perceiving and acknowledging this increased demand for media publicity and the accompanying adaptations, findings show they consciously deny this demand 'because they fear adaptations would endanger their strategic objectives' (Nölleke et al. 2021, 744). This aligns with previous findings, with sports journalists in this study sharing their frustrations that the IOC, at the macro level, was old-fashioned and archaic in its perception of an ever-evolving media landscape where younger media producers on new platforms were often ignored.
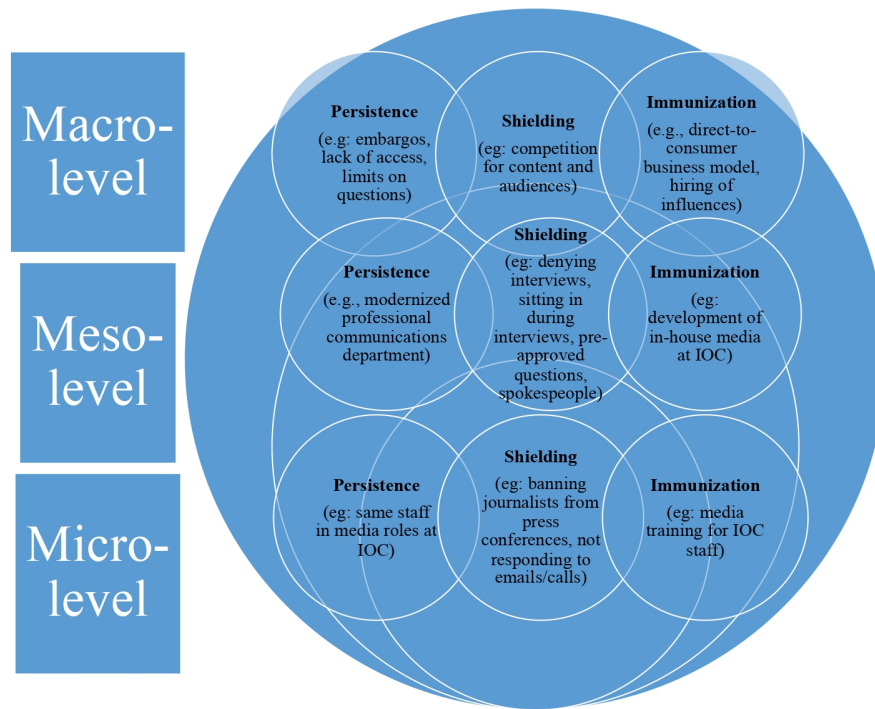
Figure 5: Examples of IOC defensive mediatization strategies at the three institutional levels (adapted from O'Boyle & Gallagher 2023).

<u>(ii) Meso level</u>

At the meso level, focus now turns towards a discussion of organisational and institutional structures of this study's findings. This concerns 'regulations, resources, hierarchies, and the interfaces of organisations to the media' (Nölleke et al. 2021, 744). Findings from this study show a distinct lack of evidence of persistence at the meso level. An explanation for the absence of persistence here could be due to the highly developed and professionalised nature of the IOC's media and communications departments. Participants varied in experience, ranging from mid-20s to late-60s in age, with different experiences reporting on the Olympics dating from the 1970s until 2024. Findings show a marked contrast in the make-up and depth of the IOC's communications teams from the 1970s compared to the 2020s. One veteran Olympics correspondent for The Associated Press said it was "night and day" comparing the IOC's internal media team from decades ago to today's "slick, sophisticated" set-up. Many participants described how the IOC's media team was as small as "one or two people" based at its headquarters in Lausanne. These

personnel had sole responsibility for handling journalists, responding to requests, and issuing media accreditations.

Another veteran Olympics reporter for The New York Times explained: "When I started out, the IOC had a very small press operation. Their press office… they had one person who dealt with media logistical issues, getting the credentials, setting up press conferences." Today's IOC media operations, in contrast, are significantly more complex and professionalised (Peña 2024; Nieland 2024), encompassing internal and external communications teams, social media specialists, in-house reporters, media analysts and digital content executives. For these reasons, this study shows a lack of persistence as a defensive mediatization strategy at the meso level, instead highlighting the highly professionalised development of the IOC's media teams in recent decades. This aligns with Peña's (2024) recent assessment that the IOC's communications strategy 'has gone from the fragmentation of platforms, actors, and organisations to a clear trend towards convergence and unity' (2). Participants, however, offered a range of contrasting perspectives on how the IOC's approach to media relations has changed in some respects and not changed at all in others. As detailed at the macro level, the IOC persists with traditional media practices like embargos, lack of locker room access compared to the United States (Fortunato 2000; Kovacs and Doczi 2019) and limitations on the number of questions allowed at certain press conferences. But in regard to its own internal communications, use of in-house content and social media usage, the IOC has modernised significantly in recent times.

Sports journalists noted that the IOC still persists with an overall view of their profession as a threat. This sense of fear and scepticism towards journalists tallies with Nölleke et al.'s (2021) description of persistence. They state that persistence is applied as a defensive strategy when actors acknowledge a demand for media publicity but decide against indulging this demand because they are afraid that adaptations could 'endanger their strategic objectives' (744). Findings from this study highlight a contrast between the modernisation of internal media operations at the IOC and a traditional, sceptical outlook of the work of journalists which has persisted to the present day. A notable argument for an absence of persistence at the meso level concerns the IOC's power and influence as one of the world's most significant sports organisations. Previous studies have highlighted that persistence within organisations aligns with a high degree of autonomy (Scheu et

al. 2014). Some participants in this study described the IOC as a wealthy, powerful, independent, self-governing, self-regulating entity that was "accountable only to itself". In this view, the IOC has the ability to refuse structural adaptations due to this strongly independent position. This view of persistence put forward by Nölleke et al. (2021) argues that organisations with high levels of autonomy do not need to allocate vast resources towards media and communications activities, because they have 'no interest in influencing others via mass media' (748). Some sports journalists in this study agreed with this viewpoint. However, IOC officials largely dismissed the IOC's high degree of autonomy which suggests it can afford to ignore media demands from external journalists.

(iii) Micro level

I now move onto a discussion of persistence specifically at the micro level. This concerns 'professional roles and the media-related behaviour of individuals' (Nölleke et al. 2021, 744). This study found limited evidence of persistence as a defensive strategy at the micro level with regards to the IOC and its handling of journalists. One example is the decision to keep individual IOC staff in their positions over a long period of time, allowing the establishment of close relationships with members of the media as a result. This example links with Nölleke et al.'s (2021) description that persistence at the micro level is driven by an individual's self-conception and their 'apprehension of a potential loss of personal authenticity and integrity resulting from media affinity' (744). In their answers, participants described how IOC staff members must build and maintain professional relationships with journalists to control and manage them effectively. Earning the trust and cooperation of journalists is a key aspect of applying defensive mediatization strategies. A means to obtain this trust is through a long-term process of familiarity made possible by constant contact between actors over time. IOC media managers build trust with journalists by being exposed to one another over many years, both in-person at press conferences and sporting events, and communicating remotely via email and phone calls. After gaining this trust, it is easier for a media manager to apply defensive strategies to control and inhibit the journalist in their work.

Persistence occurs when organisations 'deliberately decide to keep structural changes to a minimum' (Nölleke et al. 2021, 747). Findings from this study indicate that this applies to

maintaining staffing. Keeping staff and officials in positions of power over a long period of time is a key characteristic of the IOC mentioned by participants in this study. The IOC is an institution which defines itself by a strict adherence to tradition (Maguire et al. 2008; Flindall and Wassong 2017). This belief in consistency also applies to those who run the organisation, persisting not only with Olympic principles, but also with the personnel which it employs and elects. This finding, which stresses the IOC's powerful degree of self-governance, builds on Nölleke et al.'s (2021) view that persistence coincides with a heightened level of autonomy within organizations. The IOC purposefully chooses not to engage with journalists because its sense of autonomy and independence negates the necessity for such interactions. This results in a choice to avoid offensive mediatization strategies and fuels a motivation to apply defensive strategies instead. Persistence is driven by a desire to preserve established orders and structures due to a fear of potential reputational damage. According to Nölleke et al. (2021) 'social actors risk their reputation because they engage in offensive mediatization strategies' (746) which causes them to pursue alternative defensive adaptations.

These findings show that IOC media managers see limitations in engaging with journalists due to the powerful autonomy of the IOC as an organisation, which is often immune to the impact of journalists' work. As one sports journalist at The Times explained: "Often, the IOC is only accountable to itself." This links to Heinecke's (2014) suggestion that organisations will not seek media attention if they are fully satisfied with the quality and depth of their media presence. The IOC may choose instead to apply immunization in order to shrink the influence of journalists because they are content with their public image already. This coincides with Scheu et al.'s (2014) viewpoint that while certain actors may have no interest in influencing others *via* the media, this does not prevent them from exerting influence on the media to keep their attention suppressed.

5.5 Shielding as a defensive mediatization strategy

(i) Macro level

Shielding refers to decisions which are made to proactively protect against media demands (Nölleke et al. 2021). It relates to structural adaptations which are implemented even though they

'contradict the logic of the media and public attention' (744). This study offers some evidence of shielding by the IOC towards journalists at the macro level. However, the limited evidence of shielding at this level can be explained by Nölleke et al. (2021), who state that 'self-reports seem rather problematic' (749) when investigating the macro level of mediatization. Although adaptations toward media logic at this institutional level do offer advantages, they are often only short-term benefits. One example of shielding at this level is that sports organisations perceive journalists not as a direct threat, but as their *competition*. A journalist for RTÉ Sport said: "Some sports organisations do view the media as competition. They don't need us as much as before." These findings show the IOC recognise the value of clicks, views and social media engagement and do not wish to share them with journalists by offering free access (Fry 2011). This evidence highlights that, according to English (2022), sports organisations have moved 'from facilitators for media to competitors and publishers' (856). For these reasons, organisations including the IOC implicitly shield journalists away, knowing that they are increasingly in competition with them for content.

This echoes Nölleke et al.'s (2021) description of shielding as a defensive mediatization strategy where 'actors consciously implement structures in order to minimize public attention' (744). It also highlights the contradictory nature of shielding as a strategy. On the one hand, the IOC may shield journalists because they are competition for digital content (Fry 2011). But the IOC does so in order to *attract* a different type of attention (positive attention) by producing their own content which they can control and frame in a positive light (Marcinkowski 2014). The act of applying shielding as a defensive mediatization strategy at the macro level is informed by the IOC's understanding of the value of its own product. As one freelance Olympic sports journalist explained, the IOC has power and control over images, video footage and streaming rights for everything related to the Olympic Games. It sees a value in protecting this ownership and struggles to perceive additional benefits from sharing it with journalists, who they view as their competitors for audience viewing figures. This participant stated: "Every event is available to stream. The IOC have the Olympic Channel now, which provides ancillary coverage. The problem with channels like that is it's being produced by the IOC. You never hear anything negative about the Olympics there, because it's on their own channels."

Another example of shielding at the macro level identified in this study is the IOC's issuing of media guidelines to journalists, which can also be deemed an example of immunization. Participants outlined how the IOC issues its official guidelines ahead of each edition of the Summer and Winter Olympic Games. Within these official documents are the terms and conditions for members of the media who have been granted Olympic accreditation. Rules concerning the filming and distribution of Olympic-related content are provided as well as regulations concerning behaviour. Infringements of these regulations are also described, with the IOC stating that "in the event of a breach… the IOC may suspend the accredited media's access to any Olympic Venues until further notice' (IOC Paris 2024 Media Guidelines, 4). These guidelines highlight how the IOC creates specific rules regarding the production of content at the Olympic Games and creates barriers which shield access. Previous studies have identified media guidelines for judicial authorities as an example of shielding. Such guidelines 'conceal legal procedures from public scrutiny' (Nölleke et al. 2021, 751). The IOC's media guidelines strive towards a similar objective of concealment and control over the production of media content which it views as potentially threatening. This study found little other evidence of shielding at the macro level. As noted by O'Boyle and Gallagher (2023), an explanation could be modern sports organisations having 'already undergone significant levels of restructuring to accommodate media' (671). The limited evidence of shielding found at the macro level coincides with previous research in this area. Nölleke et al. (2021) explain that self-reports from interviewees 'do not provide the most valid information' (750). The reluctance of IOC officials to divulge macro level strategies which could be categorised as shielding affirms this limitation. It also underscores participants' reticence to provide detailed answers of protected institutional norms. Ironically, this is itself an example of shielding which I was subjected to by some IOC officials during this study.

(ii) Meso level

At the meso level, this study reported significant evidence of shielding from the IOC towards journalists. Findings described a range of different tactics used for the purposes of 'shielding against media resonance' (Marcinkowski 2014, 13) with the ultimate goal 'to avoid unwanted media attention' (Strömbäck and Van Aelst 2013, 50). Examples outlined in the findings chapter include IOC media managers denying interview requests and media officers, at times, creating a

hostile atmosphere during interviews. Other examples of shielding at the meso level include media officials requesting a list of questions from journalists prior to interviews, and the persistent use of spokesmen during IOC press conferences.

An online sports journalist at SportsJOE aptly described media managers as "blockers", explaining that they "want to completely control everything." Another sportswriter for The Guardian shared his frustration at being denied interview requests. It was suggested that unnecessary media engagements "stop teams from achieving results" due to being a distraction from on-field preparations. This comment affirms the assertion by Kunelius and Reunanen (2016) that systems are interdependent on others' performance. The media will only be accommodated by these others (e.g., coaches, executives, etc.) when they perceive media as being indispensable in achieving their internal objectives (Nölleke et al. 2021). Media duties are one element in the wider sporting organisation. It impacts other areas of the organisation, but does not possess complete control (Marcinkowski 2014) and is dependent on other areas. Peña (2024) suggests this is evident at the IOC where 'relationships between the International Olympic Committee and Olympic Games communication stakeholders are built around an interrelated system' (2).

Participants described instances of being denied interview requests for a myriad of reasons: athletes not having time, IOC officials not feeling in the mood, coaches exerting influence to prevent interviews taking place, media managers wanting to protect their bosses. When asked about the use of shielding as a defensive strategy, media managers offered a range of perspectives on why they feel it is necessary. One Olympic media manager said keeping journalists satisfied was only one small element of his job, taking into account other stakeholders: "[My job is] looking after the media, looking after the fans, looking after sponsors. So, it involves a lot of stakeholders, and it's about keeping them all satisfied." Another media manager said, in his experience, journalists had become "spoiled" with the level of access granted to them and reacted badly when that access was limited in any way. Ultimately, however, media managers said shielding was applied in order to protect athletes and their bosses, especially within the IOC. An Olympic media manager said the stakes of the organisation dictate whether they have a "proactive or a reactive strategy."

A second example of shielding at the meso level uncovered was the presence of media managers/officers during interviews. Sports journalists said this was common practice at sports organisations and sports clubs, but it has become increasingly "overbearing" in recent years, compared to the past, when journalists and athletes/officials were given more one-to-one privacy. A sportswriter for The Athletic described how it can feel like a media officer is "breathing down your neck" when he tries to conduct interviews. He said it can be "difficult to get great quotes in that environment, because everybody is on edge". This description aligns with Suggs' (2016) description of journalists being a 'persona non grata' (263) and feeling like an unwelcome intruder in their own workspaces. Another journalist, who works for RTÉ Sport, described media managers acting as "joy thiefs" with their presence at interviews and media events. He explained: "There have been instances where a player will come over to chat to us and you will see a media manager running across to stop him, for fear that he might let his guard down."

Participants said it was a purposeful tactic by media managers to make their presence felt, knowing that it would stifle proceedings. A broadcaster for Virgin Media said this created an atmosphere that was "pretty constrained and controlled" and that "having one-on-one time is less prevalent" nowadays in sports journalism. Although not a common occurrence, some sports journalists in this study cited examples of media managers requesting a list of questions prior to an interview. This practice is undertaken so that the interviewee is prepared and to filter out unwanted and difficult questions surrounding controversial subjects. One freelance Olympic journalist, detailing his experiences at the 2022 Winter Olympics, said: "There were a few incidents with journalists being told they couldn't ask certain questions" regarding alleged human abuses against Uyghurs in China. This specific finding at the meso level aligns with Nölleke et al.'s (2021) description of shielding as the 'implementation of restrictive approval procedures around media interviews' (745). In this sense, IOC media staff make conscious efforts to interject themselves, protect their colleagues and purposefully refuse to serve media demands for open answers.

A final example of shielding at the meso level discussed by participants was the increasing use of spokesmen by the IOC. Sports journalists said the IOC has relied on spokesmen at press events *in place* of IOC officials, in order to shield them from media scrutiny. They explained that video footage of a spokesman (unfamiliar to the general public) struggling to answer a journalists'

question at a press conference is far less damaging than footage of the IOC President (who is immediately recognised by the public) doing the same. This is a clear example of the IOC wishing to shield its officials from journalists' scrutiny and the damaging visual spectacle that could ensue. When asked about the use of a spokesperson as a tactic to shield Olympic officials, one Olympic media manager said it was simply pragmatic and effective communications. Ultimately, he said the role of a media manager is to protect their colleagues from potential media damage. These findings show that shielding is an effective method of doing so, whether that is through denying interview requests, media officers sitting in during interviews, requesting pre-approved questions, or being the public face of the organisation at press conferences. These findings at the meso level align with Scheu's (2019) view that defensive mediatization tactics such as shielding are intentionally deployed to provide 'protection from dysfunctional external influences' (14).

(iii) Micro level

This study found significant evidence of shielding at the micro level of individual actors. Examples of shielding at this level include IOC officials restricting access, overestimating their role and media managers banning difficult journalists from press conferences and events. Participants reiterated that the personality of individual media managers and press officers has a notable impact on the relationship between journalists and the organisations they cover. A difficult media manager, in turn, makes the life of a sports journalist difficult. Participants cited examples of media managers intentionally not responding to requests for information and not replying to calls and emails from reporters. They said these are common examples of media managers seeking to protect their bosses, athletes and IOC officials from journalists and shield 'against media resonance' (Marcinkowski 2014, 13).

Relating to the previous example at the meso level of media officers creating an "uncomfortable" atmosphere during interviews, participants also cited the behaviour of individual communications staff members. Sports journalists said many communications staff "overestimated the importance of their role" and were, at times, overzealous in their attempts to handle journalists. This manifests in restricting access to a degree that some sports journalists in this study said was "over the top". As described by a sports broadcaster at Virgin Media: "Press officers overplay the importance of

their role. Perhaps for their own professional protection. They feel like they have *to be seen* to be in charge. That's an issue." This highlights shielding at the individual level, whereby press officers take it upon themselves to impose limitations beyond a necessary level. This may be due to a sense of ego, self-importance, or simply seeking to maintain a preservation of their own position. An IOC media manager said there was a delicate balance between desiring to manage the media (Marcinkowski 2014) and avoiding intruding too excessively: "I have tried to 'manage the conversation' whereby you try and talk to the journalist and say *'look, please don't ask this question in that environment... maybe there's a different way we can go about this*.'"

A second example of shielding at the micro level cited by participants was the practice of media managers at the IOC not responding to calls and emails. This was a repeated frustration among sports journalists interviewed. Sports journalists complained about the "lack of transparency" for why their requests were ignored, explaining that some media managers were simply "arrogant", and others were "lazy in responding." This evidence highlights that not all defensive mediatization strategies are intentional ploys, but rather the by-product of an individual's behaviour. This defensive strategy offered conflicting perspectives in this study, however. IOC media managers stressed that they made "every effort" to respond to all requests made by journalists. Sports journalists complained that this was not always a reality. These individuals described repeated instances of their calls, emails and requests for comment being overlooked by IOC press officers. More often, however, sports journalists reported being dissatisfied not with being totally ignored, but the lack of depth and substance when they did receive responses. Short replies lacking in relevant information, "no comment" and instructions directing journalists to refer to press releases and the IOC's website were common refrains. Participants said these deliberate acts of non-cooperation could often be explained by the personal traits of individual press officers, rather than a specific top-down media policy. This evidence coincides with Nölleke et al.'s (2021) view that persistence at the micro level is driven by 'an individual's self-conception' (746). Sports journalists argued that many press officers and communications officials persist with defensive strategies to reaffirm their own position and sense of professional self-worth. It is also motivated by a fear of losing status in their roles. With the deliberate act of individual press officers ignoring calls and emails, responding with "no comment" and referring journalists to consult inadequate press releases, the IOC shields itself by creating an information vacuum.

A more intentional defensive strategy, which is also linked to the personality and motivations of individual media managers, is the act of banning journalists from press conferences and media events. Participants cited examples of when they were banned, or when it occurred to colleagues. One sports broadcaster said: "You can have some very overzealous media managers, who are very controlling. They can make your life hard." This individual added that some media managers were "*wilfully* uncooperative." Indeed, this description correlates with Donges' (2005) description of defensive media tactics as conscious non-adaptations. Reasons for Olympics journalists being banned stemmed from anger and dissatisfaction from IOC media officials at how a story was reported or framed. It also resulted from disagreements regarding the phrasing of questions posed during press conferences. Evidence in this study highlights, however, that banning journalists is less common than previous decades. Media managers said that banning journalists today "looks bad" and can "cause more harm than good." Findings show that banning journalists is, on the one hand, an effective defensive strategy which shields IOC and Olympic officials from the scrutiny of the media by eliminating their presence. But consequently, it is an ineffective strategy due to the potential outcry and backlash that can result from preventing journalists from asking questions and doing their jobs. Most significantly at the micro level, however, is the belief from sports journalists that the IOC wilfully ignores the media's requests for engagement because it effectively neutralises negative media coverage.

By this, sports journalists suggested the IOC seeks to avoid negative coverage, in the words of one participant, by "burying their heads in the sand." This investigative reporter explained this example of shielding in more depth: "It's better for them to ignore a potential scandal. With one investigation, the IOC could say: *'we have to challenge it!'* But with other stories, which are not as bad, they say: *'don't talk about it, the best strategy is to silence the whole situation.*" This answer highlights the defensive strategy of ignoring journalists' requests by individual actors. Strömbäck and Van Aelst (2013) argue this strategy is implemented 'to avoid unwanted media attention' (350). However, in contrast to earlier explanations of laziness, arrogance, and ego to dismiss journalists, this explanation highlights that the IOC ignores the media intentionally in the hope of avoiding unnecessary extra attention. By issuing a press release or public statement, for example, in response to a doping scandal, this gives a story legitimacy and confirms its significance.

However, by ignoring said story and not responding to journalists, it leaves the story in limbo and does not acknowledge it with an official comment. This underscores a method of shielding with contrasting benefits and limitations for the IOC.

5.6 Immunization as a defensive mediatization strategy

(i) Macro level

Immunization refers to strategies which are implemented 'to prevent dysfunctional consequences that might result from an increasing consideration of media demands' (Nölleke et al. 2021, 745). This study found some evidence of immunization at the macro level, namely a movement towards direct-to-consumer business models at sports organisations and the hiring of influencers and content creators. Findings show that the IOC helps to build its own institutional capacity by establishing direct relationships with audiences and Olympic fans. This approach is utilized instead of establishing connections with fans via an intermediary such as journalists. A communications manager explained this outlook, saying: "Associations prefer to speak directly to their fans, instead of using the traditional media." Another communications officer remarked that sports organisations had limited power over what journalists will say, therefore they can reclaim influence by communicating *directly* with their fanbase. "You cannot control what journalists will write. They may use *part* of what you say to tell a story, which can be annoying. This is why sports associations have their own TV channels and media teams."

Findings demonstrated that employing a direct-to-consumer approach by the IOC maintains autonomy and builds institutional capacity. It represents a strategy which is more risk-averse than engaging with journalists. Speaking with journalists in order to build relationships with fans of the Olympics is an approach where more can go wrong. Indeed, according to Rowe (2009), sports organisations can actually witness a backlash from fans by trying too hard to satisfy media demands. By avoiding intermediaries such as journalists (Marcinkowski 2014), the IOC can control its own message and communicate it directly to fans. Participants said this defensive strategy succeeds in immunizing journalists. Simultaneously this safer, direct approach helps to attract sponsors. The cycling correspondent at The Irish Times said athletes and sports

organisations alike see the benefit of a direct-to-consumer approach, bypassing journalists in the process: "Cyclists have sponsors and sponsors want publicity, but journalists aren't as needed to tell [athletes'] stories, because teams can tell stories themselves directly to fans." This is an example of indirect media effects (Kepplinger 2008; Meyen et al. 2014).

A sportswriter at The Athletic UK similarly remarked that sports organisations recognise that their athletes/players are assets and the media's role as a link between athletes and fans has diminished. This shows the media's role as conduit between clubs and fans is less significant (Perreault et al. 2024). Findings highlight a notable contrast in the use of immunization, however. Increasingly, sports organisations do not wish to use journalists as an intermediary to connect with fans. They are highly enthusiastic, however, about the use of influencers and online content creators in their place. Findings show that sports organisations including the IOC use social media influencers and online content creators to establish positive relationships with fans. In contrast to journalists, who they view as a risky intermediary whose message they cannot dictate, sports organisations do have control over the content produced by externally-hired influencers. An organisation such as the IOC can import the influencer's already-established audience. By doing this, the IOC uses the influencer's platform to transform fandom of the influencer into fandom of the Olympics. On the use of social media influencers by modern sports organisations, one Olympics media manager said: "The advent of social media has inevitably changed everything, because we can go direct to audiences in a way that we couldn't decades ago." This shows that immunization was simply a by-product of using influencers and content creators in place of journalists in order to build rapport with audiences: "It's incredibly important for us to have influence through Twitter, TikTok, Instagram. They [influencers] have such different audiences compared to The Daily Telegraph, The Daily Mail, the BBC."

Participants said that influencers help sports organisations by producing engaging, humorous, aesthetically-pleasing visual content which frames sporting events, such as the Olympic Games, positively. This content will therefore naturally reflect well on the organisation that stages such sporting events, namely the IOC. By using such social media influencers as a conduit with fans, instead of journalists, the IOC is avoiding the 'dysfunctional consequences' which Nölleke et al. (2021) point to as a motivation for employing immunization as a defensive mediatization strategy.

As outlined by one Olympics media manager, having a direct-to-consumer approach via influencers means less risk and more reward for a sports organisation. "[They deliver] content to our fans which is high production and interesting for them. But it also gives value to our commercial partners, because their brand and messaging will be seeded throughout the content they post." This point suggests that new social media platforms have made journalists less important for creating fans of the Olympics. These findings concur with McEnnis (2023) who highlighted how new online influencers within sports media 'divert attention away from other practitioners' (441) such as traditional journalists. He argues that these online influencers and content creators are now 'blurring the distinction between team media and journalism' (434). Establishing brand loyalty with the Olympics is much more effective via these social media channels, rather than via an intermediary such as a journalist, as one IOC media manager explained: "Instagram and TikTok content creates a *deeper* level of interaction with the Olympic brand."

(ii) Meso level

At the meso level this study also found evidence of immunization by the IOC in relation to its dealings with journalists. Examples of this strategy of defensive mediatization include the use of in-house media by the IOC and also the threat of libel/defamation against Olympic journalists. The use of in-house content by the IOC was a repeated concern for sports journalists. They view their roles as being co-opted by the clubs, teams, and sports organisations they cover, giving rise to the recent trend of *in-house journalists* at sports organisations. According to McEnnis (2021), these represent 'new actors who have adopted [sports journalism's] norms, practices, codes, routines and values' (2). The term is, according to participants, a significant contradiction. Journalists define their profession according to the principles of being objective, independent and balanced (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2021). Conversely, producing content for a sports organisation only frames the organisation in a one-sided, positive light. The opportunity for critical coverage or dissent is absent, hence the contradiction of working as an in-house journalist (Mirer 2019b). An Irish Times sportswriter said: "With the whole in-house journalist thing, it's fine. Nothing wrong with it, but just don't call them a journalist. They are PR." This concurs with Perreault et al.'s

(2024) assessment of in-house sports reporters whose role 'straddle the realms of journalism, storytelling, and organisational loyalty' (213)

Like most modern sports organisations, this study found that in recent years the IOC has dedicated significant resources towards producing in-house content. They view it as an important means to promote the Olympic message and to obtain positive engagements from fans. A benefit of producing in-house content is the ability to control their own narrative (Sherwood et al. 2016) and frame all elements of the IOC's work around the Olympics in a positive manner. By producing their own content, the IOC can successfully bypass traditional media and journalists, not requiring them as before. A broadcaster for Virgin Media said there was simply an acceptance from sports journalists of in-house media being a part of the environment: "It's visibly a part of the landscape now. The bigger sports organisations will say: *'we've got our own stuff, why would we cooperate with you guys' [journalists].*" Another sports journalist for The Irish Times said that journalists were viewed as "a nuisance" by sports organisations including the IOC and did not want them around if they were going to ask difficult questions.

These findings demonstrate the successful nature of in-house content as an immunization strategy. On the one hand, it is a proactive approach by the IOC to put significant resources towards producing their own media. The effect of this strategy, however, is to co-opt the role of journalists by appropriating their jobs and performing journalistic functions solely for the benefit of the sports organisation. Sports journalists in this study said they were worried about the prevalence of in-house media and what it means for the future of their profession. A rise in the production of in-house content creates more jobs for in-house reporters (English 2022). Combined with the increasingly unstable and precarious journalism industry, this creates an imbalance and a funnelling of potential journalists towards in-house positions. As noted by an Associated Press sports journalist: "It is a worry. You are doing writing, producing video and audio, but you are doing it to promote the product, promoting the brand, whether it is a player or corporation. It is a PR thing." We can see here that the professional challenges which are affecting sports journalism have resulted in more journalists moving towards these in-house positions. This has been to the benefit of the IOC. While in-house content can be interpreted as an act of shielding against journalists, its primary function is to 'bypass external media where possible and develop internal

media capabilities' (O'Boyle and Gallagher, 670). According to a Virgin Media sports broadcaster, the migration of more journalists towards in-house positions has resulted in sports organisations becoming "more uncooperative" to traditional media. He aptly explained this dilemma by stating: "They realise they can create their own content, so why would they *bother* cooperating with us?" Some participants also speculated how this emerging trend would continue in the future. Interviewees said career prospects for new journalism and media graduates were uncertain and that in-house sports media opportunities offered more stability. This evidence emphasises that immunization is a powerful defensive mediatization strategy, but one which organisations including the IOC facilitate and take advantage of, rather than directly implement. As such, these findings illustrate Nölleke et al.'s (2021) argument that, at the meso level, structural adaptations to combat the dysfunctional results of mediatization are 'quite common, even though they are rarely referred to as such' (748).

A second example of immunization at the meso level detailed by participants was the threat of libel/defamation against journalists. A number of interviewees discussed the stifling impact that the threat of legal action from organisations such as the IOC can have on sports journalists. They said it inhibits their ability to hold the IOC to account, especially for freelance journalists who do not have the financial backing and institutional support of a newspaper or large media publication. The threat of a legal letter prevents journalists from pursuing in-depth reporting about the IOC and effectively silences them. It also prevents journalists from considering stories that could be perceived as legally risky. One freelance Olympic sports writer said: "The libel laws make it very difficult for journalists to report rigorously on sports organisations." Another, who works for The Evening Standard, added: "I have seen the way colleagues of mine struggled because of the constant threat of legal action and libel. The solicitor's letter is used as a weapon by the IOC." Participants said powerful sports organisations including the IOC recognise the vulnerable position of many sports journalists, who wish to avoid a protracted legal case. The time, effort and financial resources needed to go through with a potential libel or defamation case is naturally off-putting for journalists. Findings in this study indicate that this makes them unlikely to pursue stories which could result in legal cases being brought against them. Organisations such as the IOC have the legal staff and financial resources to pursue such cases, if they feel a journalist has produced a story which they feel is unfair and libellous. This observation echoes Strömbäck and Van Aelst's

(2013) view that organisations apply defensive strategies when they see the media as a threat which must be neutralised.

An Olympics reporter for The Guardian said: "It is a tactic to make newspapers, that are already in financially precarious positions, even more concerned. They have to play safe." A sports broadcaster for RTÉ said this "very heavily litigious environment" succeeds in immunizing journalists. This tactic creates a heightened sense of fear which scares journalists from pursuing stories that hold the IOC accountable but could end up in court. This evidence highlights the effectiveness of threatening a journalist with libel/defamation as a defensive mediatization strategy. It shows that even the potential threat of a legal letter can prevent journalists from pursuing stories that warrant such attention. It also highlights how the prevalence of freelance Olympic journalists, who do not have the financial and legal backing of a newspaper or media publication, makes these legal threats even more effective.

(iii) Micro level

This study highlights evidence of immunization as a defensive mediatization strategy at the micro level. Immunization was most prevalent with the use of media training by the IOC for its staff and athletes, resulting in both parties following a corporate brief in interviews with the media. Media training is a key aspect of all modern sports organisations (Scheu et al. 2014) and this study's results show that the IOC is no different in this regard. Media managers at the IOC interviewed for this study said all high-ranking officials and employees receive some level of training to improve their performance with the media. Sports journalists, conversely, shared their frustration with the prevalence of media training. They said it results in "bland, boring quotes" and makes their jobs to tell interesting sporting stories about the Olympics more difficult.

Notably, media managers described the different approaches and techniques they take when conducting media training, depending on whether they are training athletes or Olympic officials. Olympians are encouraged to be open with the media, knowing that many Olympic sports receive little media attention. They want to maximise their opportunity when journalists show interest. One Olympic media manager explained: "Olympians see the media as a great opportunity to build

their personalities, their character, their personal brands and profile, to get their sport more coverage." This media manager said it was their job to "imbue confidence" in Olympians with media training. In contrast, participants in this study highlighted how media training for IOC officials differed. Tactics to deflect from media attention were described, with the objective being to give as little information to the media as possible. An Olympic communications officer said: "We do have education sessions… what to say, what not to say. We remind them about the pitfalls."

One IOC media official said that they are "wary" of the media due to negative and unfair stories in the past. A bad experience with journalists can make an IOC official less willing to engage in the future. This individual explained that: "Sometimes it's a case of once bitten, twice shy." Sports journalists said that media training can result in interviewees coming across as more "robotic and corporate" in their answers. One broadcaster for CNN said that conducting interviews with someone who had received significant levels of media training was "like pulling teeth." Media training differs depending on whether a sports organisation wishes to elicit media attention for the promotion of Olympians and their stories, or to deflect from the media, in response to a crisis or scandal. It is a highly effective defensive mediatization strategy at the micro level for individual actors (Meyen et al. 2014). Participants in this study who work at the IOC said that a common misconception about media training is that it only seeks to reduce potential threats posed by exposure to the media. This viewpoint was made clear by sports journalists, who argued that media training "dumbed down" officials who were "scared of saying the wrong thing". However, these observations underscore Nölleke et al.'s (2021) view that media training can serve offensive *and* defensive goals concurrently. It does so by 'optimizing access to media publicity' and also enables staff 'to understand journalism and defend against dysfunctional external influences' (747). In this conceptualization, this study highlights that the IOC provides media training to immunize threats posed, but simultaneously equip its Olympians and officials to charismatically promote the positive aspects of its work too.

This is particularly evident when media training is conducted by staff who are ex-journalists. As mentioned by the online editor for RTÉ Sport, these staff members possess in-depth knowledge of the journalism industry and therefore "know all our tricks." A former journalist providing media

training to an IOC official is aware of what angles journalists may take on controversial topics, how they will phrase questions and how they may seek to frame issues. As one media manager explained about conducting press conferences: "You should know what every question will be before it gets asked. It's all about anticipating what the media are going to ask us about and preparing in advance." Sports journalists complained about the impact of media training, but said it also acted as a motivational incentive for them to work harder. One sportswriter for The New York Times said the reason modern sports organisations have invested such a high degree of resources into media training is simply due to distrust: "I think it is a fear of saying something wrong." Another sports broadcaster said it was the job of good journalists to "break through the media training" as best as possible, to try and combat the immunization: "If an organisation is reasonably sophisticated, it will have trained its people to say as little as possible."

As we can see from the findings of this study, media training is a popular and effective example of a defensive mediatization strategy at the micro level. Notably, it also draws attention to the ways in which the same tactic (i.e., media training) can be applied in multiple ways. Olympians are given training by IOC media staff in order to "imbue them with confidence" and be open about telling their inspirational stories as athletes. In contrast, IOC officials are given media training in order to "say as little as possible" and keep the media at bay. This confirms Nölleke et al.'s (2021) assertion about the duality of mediatization strategies and how they can be both offensive and defensive simultaneously. This study's findings align with this view in the context of immunization.

5.7 Steering as a defensive mediatization strategy

The study proposes a unique fourth category of defensive mediazation, which is labelled *'steering'*. Containing similarities to two previous defensive strategies outlined by Nölleke et al. (2021) — shielding and immunization — *steering* is a separate approach. Through interviews for this study, *steering* emerged as a distinct defensive strategy used by the IOC across the macro, meso and micro levels. *Steering* is defined as 'guiding the media towards desirable ends' (O'Boyle and Gallagher 2023, 671). It is not simply a case of a sports organisation developing capacity or blocking, but rather an intentional ploy to lead the media towards the objectives of the organisation

itself. This study identified a number of examples of *steering* across the three institutional levels. These include using public relations as an organisational function (macro level); the use of Zoom for media events, the hiring of in-house journalists (meso level); leaking information to journalists, issuing "ready-to-use" media packs/press releases, giving access to pro-IOC journalists (micro level). The next section provides a discussion and analysis of *steering* as a fourth defensive mediatization strategy, adding to the existing mutually-reinforcing categories of persistence, shielding, and immunization.
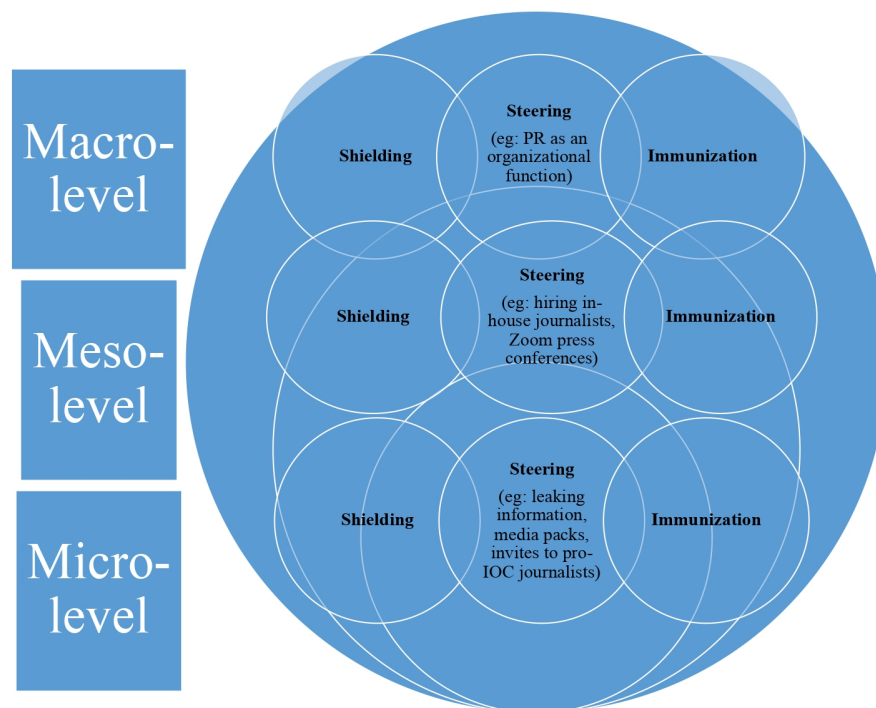
Figure 6: Examples of *'steering'* as a unique fourth defensive mediatization strategy (adapted from O'Boyle & Gallagher 2023).

(i) Macro level

At the macro level, this study found supporting evidence of *steering*. One example of steering at this institutional level is the establishment of public relations as an organisational structure by the IOC, alongside other functions like staffing. Previous research has highlighted the use of PR within mediatization (Marcinkowski et al. 2014; Scheu et al. 2014). However, no distinction is made over whether its application is offensive or defensive. The use of public relations is a fundamental aspect of all modern sports organisations and participants in this study highlighted its deployment by the IOC to influence public sentiment. This was particularly evident in findings when sports journalists

discussed the IOC's handling of issues such as military conflicts and the inclusion or exclusion of transgender athletes. The IOC has been forced to take a public stance on each of these topics in recent years, particularly in regard to which Olympic athletes and nations were allowed to compete at the Paris 2024 Games.

One sports journalist from The Guardian said the IOC used public relations in order to "throw sand into your eyes". Participants were keen to note the ability (and need) for audiences to distinguish the content they consume. Sports journalists stressed that their work is characterised by objectivity, independence and reliability (Mirer 2015; McEnnis 2016), while public relations material needed to be considered with critical scrutiny. The ability of the audience to make that distinction between what content is journalism and what is PR was fundamental. One Olympics media manager recognised this and said that sports organisations could not fall into the trap of becoming "tone deaf" and not listening to fans and audiences, despite a desire to steer the conversation and set the agenda. "With the advent and rise of PR in our industries, if we believe ourselves to be the gatekeepers of information — the arbiters to shape the news — then we can't *not* listen to our fans." An Olympics sportswriter for the BBC said that audiences do naturally switch off to PR material once a saturation point is reached: "That's the thing about sports organisations like the IOC. The positive PR stuff they put out is good, but what they need to realise is that you can have too much sugar! If you have too much sugar, it ultimately makes you nauseous and sick."

Responding to this viewpoint, an Olympics media manager said that communications specialists can only steer the public conversation with the help of journalists. He said using journalists in order to promote the IOC's public relations material was the desired goal. "[We] require media attention and traditional PR to *enhance* in-house content. This is incredibly important. You need both." Sports journalists also reflected on this sentiment, pointing out the need for journalists to recognise how and when they are being "steered" towards the goals and objectives of the organisations they report on. As noted by previous research (Strömbäck and Kiousis 2011; Marcinkowski 2014), a key motivation for the application of defensive mediatization strategies is the desire to guide the media towards an organisation's strategic objectives. Sports journalists said that simply repeating claims without fact-checking, or regurgitating speeches word-for-word is a dangerous way for journalists to fall into these defensive strategies aimed at steering the public

agenda. These findings correlate with Boyle and Hayes' (2014) view that within sports organisations, 'reputation management [is] identified by the sector as *the* contemporary challenge for PR professionals' (133). The IOC devotes significant resources towards enforcing public relations in order to not only manage, but often repair and enhance the organisation's reputation which has come under significant scrutiny and criticism in recent years. What this study's findings emphasise, however, is the IOC's belief that journalists play an integral role in the dissemination of public relations material. Journalists imbue this content with added layers of credibility due to the profession's principles of verifying information for accuracy and authenticity before relaying it into the public domain. IOC officials acknowledged this influence and consciously use journalists to steer public opinion. This aligns with previous studies into the role of communications managers at sports organisations where the goal of public relations is 'understanding multiple publics and stakeholders, and how to manage their expectations, attitudes and behaviour' (Boyle and Hayes 2012, 133). In this sense, while *steering* relates to maximising revenue, monetizing audiences and generating data, it is more narrowly concerned with controlling media narratives and, hence, is a much more proactive strategy than shielding.

(ii) Meso level

At the meso level, one of the most significant methods of *steering* uncovered in this study is the act of journalists choosing to leave the media industry and instead go and work in-house for sports organisations. This is an apt *combination* of immunization and shielding as, according to Nölleke et al. (2021), 'only those who know how the media work are able to preserve their autonomy' (745). Participants in this study echoed those sentiments, with one Irish Times sportswriter explaining: "Who better to manage your media than somebody who works, or worked, in the media themselves? They know how to manage the media and what to prevent. Poacher turned gamekeeper, it's the perfect foil." The poacher-turned-gamekeeper phenomenon is not exclusive to sports journalism, as is evidenced by the number of former political journalists who work as government press advisers (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Birkner 2015; Esser and Strömbäck 2014; Mazzoleni 2008). This finding builds on previous research highlighting evidence of autonomous, powerful organisations seeking to *manage* the media through the application of mediatization strategies (D'Angelo et al. 2014; Deacon and Stanyer 2014; Marcinkowski 2014). What this study

adds, however, is the prevalence of the poacher-turned-gamekeeper trend within the Olympic sphere and within sports media more broadly. A combination of external factors, beyond even the IOC's control, has witnessed a migration of sports journalists to go and work in-house instead of seeking employment at traditional media such as newspapers, radio, or television (Sherwood and Nicholson 2017). In-house journalists are subjected to heightened levels of editorial control which comprises their autonomy (English 2022), causes a decline in accountability and exacerbates conflicts of interests whereby they must now prioritise an organisation's reputation. While organisation's harness journalists' highly-valued skills to produce in-house content, the trustworthiness of this work for audiences is devalued because of its inherent bias (Mirer 2019a).

A sportswriter for The Athletic UK said the trend was also common at Premier League football clubs, whose internal media staff is filled with ex-journalists: "It happens for a number of reasons. One reason is that they are better paid working for clubs than local media organisations. Maybe they fancy a new challenge, especially with access diminishing. Maybe a journalist wants to be closer to the action." These working conditions, which include better pay, a more stable career path, more job opportunities, better access, and reduced levels of stress, all convolute to force sports journalists out of the journalism industry (McEnnis 2021) and towards working for the clubs and organisations they once reported on. These findings are important for our understanding of how defensive mediatization strategies are formulated. As previously highlighted by Landerer (2014) and Sporer-Wagner and Marcinkowski (2014), an understanding of how the journalism industry operates will have a significant influence on how mediatization policies are put together by individual actors.

For organisations such as the IOC, the poacher-turned-gamekeeper trend is an effective example of *steering*. Critical journalists are silenced and instead switch sides, creating a vacuum of dissenting voices. Their skill sets are also harnessed for the benefit of the sports organisation, steering towards their objectives (Marcinkowski, 2014), instead of for a newspaper. Likewise, a journalist now working as a media officer or communications manager will be knowledgeable about the journalism industry and will be more effective at neutralising/steering their former colleagues because they once stood in their place. A sports broadcaster for NBC Sports said:

"Sports organisations need professionals who understand how to manage the media and how it works. So they end up hiring people who are experienced journalists."

These findings correspond with Donges and Jarren's (2014) view that: 'The first aspect of mediatization is perception' (189). This shows that those who understand the journalism industry are best placed to neutralise its impact. Some sports journalists interviewed for this study said there was a feeling of betrayal at colleagues who "switched sides" leaving journalism for communications and PR roles. Others were more sympathetic, explaining that the difficult and precarious nature of the industry left many with no choice but to seek other opportunities. "Many colleagues of mine felt the journalism industry wasn't a long-term bet," said one sports broadcaster. A sports columnist for the Irish Examiner was less sympathetic: "Sometimes it does piss people off. You get the impression some of them have forgotten their roots as journalists." This answer echoes (Mirer 2019b) viewpoint that sports journalists face accusations of compromising their professionalism by switching sides. Indeed, this argument was compounded by participants in this study who were frustrated at colleagues who left journalism only to return later on. One sports writer for the BBC complained that the integrity of journalism's core mission was undermined when its practitioners could "switch and swap" between working as a journalist, working for a sports organisation, and returning to the media again. This participant used the word "tainted" to describe this switching of roles. What this poacher-turned-gamekeeper trend illustrates, however, is that organisations such as the IOC don't just harness journalistic expertise and subsequently develop internal capacity, but also 'neutralize and *redirect* it' (O'Boyle and Gallagher 2023, 673). This further demonstrates that the IOC takes advantage of the industry-wide challenges within sports journalism to bolster its own position. Journalists possess unique skills which can effectively communicate information to audiences and influence public opinion. When employment opportunities are limited for these journalists, many feel no choice but to seek opportunities at sporting organisations. This redirects their professional skills away from providing information to audiences in a public-service function, to providing information which positively frames the organisations they previously held to account. This creates a vacuum of investigative journalism and critical reporting in a sporting context.

From the perspective of the IOC, they see a number of benefits for hiring former journalists to work for them instead. Journalists understand the media landscape, are informed about the sports they cover and are motivated and driven in their new roles, after feeling "burned-out, undervalued and underappreciated" working in journalism. One Olympic communications manager explains that while the term *'in-house journalist'* can seem a contradiction, for the sports organisation it is an effective example of *steering*: "The 'club journalists' or in-house journalist does feel like a bit of an oxymoron. But sports organisations like us have a different angle. We're never going to knock our athletes or sports, because they're our's, under the guise of an Olympic Games." This viewpoint emphasises Johnson's (2002) claim that different groups of media 'have complicated, multiple perspectives' (105) on the same phenomena. These answers from participants highlight that a deep understanding of what it means to work as a journalist is an effective asset for the IOC to neutralise those still working in the industry (Maurer and Pfetsch 2014).

A second example of *steering* at the meso level highlighted in the findings of this study is the continued use of Zoom by sports organisations including the IOC. In the wake of the Covid-19 Pandemic in 2020, in-person media events and press conferences were discouraged for the protection of health. In their place, online press events became widespread thanks to online video-calling platforms like Zoom, Skype and Microsoft Teams. This was a highly effective short-term solution (Gentile et al. 2022), allowing journalists to continue to speak with athletes, Olympians, officials and coaches, and get the quotes they needed for stories. Participants in this study, however, complained about the continued prevalence of Zoom in a *post-Pandemic* world. They view its use instead of traditional in-person media events and press conferences as an intentional strategy to inhibit journalists. A sportswriter for the Irish Independent said: "It's ridiculous in a post-Covid age that they still use Zoom calls instead of in-person."

Journalists said sports organisations can choose which reporters get invited to attend online Zoom media conferences, decide which journalists get to ask questions and even have the power to mute journalists if necessary. This is clear evidence of the sports organisation employing agenda setting in terms of choosing which journalists get access, steering favourable journalists towards them and unfavourable journalists away. A sports journalist for RTÉ Sport explained: "Sports organisations can control things more, because so many press conferences and interviews are now being held

over Zoom since the Pandemic. It's a lot more convenient to host them that way, but they can choose who attends, who asks questions, and the opportunity to ask follow-up questions isn't there. On Zoom, they can just mute you." This creates a constrained environment which is more managed and tightly controlled. It discourages dissenting voices and the opportunity for follow-up questions from journalists. Crucially, participants also pointed out that by the IOC hosting more press events online, it means journalists cannot mingle, network, and obtain off-the-record information. Mingling with sources over coffee, in hotel lobbies and in press rooms after official duties are completed are all traditional ways in which journalists obtain information (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2021).

Participants said gathering insights for stories from unnamed/anonymous sources, obtaining information on deep background and being able to offer colour and depth in reporting of stories on-site are all lost in the age of Zoom press conferences. A sportswriter for The Washington Post remarked: "There is less room for creativity and exclusives." Sports journalists said that while the use of Zoom was a convenient short-term solution in response to the Covid Pandemic, its continued use by organisations like the IOC was an intentional strategy to enforce more controls on journalists. While sports journalists did acknowledge the convenience of Zoom for allowing them to obtain quotes in a fast and effective manner, cutting down on the need for travel expenses, they said it was also harmful for the practice of in-depth sports journalism. An Olympic sports journalist for *InsideTheGames* summarised: "[Zoom] really interrupts the flow of the press conference and prevents good information and answers being brought forward. It stifles it. Maybe that's the motive and the intention [of the sports organisation]."

(iii) Micro level

This study found a number of examples of *steering* as a defensive mediatization strategy at the micro level of individual actors. Examples include the leaking of information by the IOC to journalists and the issuing of "ready-to-use" media packs/press releases to journalists. The tactic of leaking information to reporters is a common practice in journalism (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2021) and this study's findings show the Olympic world is no different. Participants gave instances

of when they had been given information, either off-the-record or on deep background by sources, most of whom wished to remain anonymous to protect their identity.

Sports journalists in this study went into detail about the ethical struggles they confront when faced with being leaked information. They enjoy the opportunity to tell exclusive stories with behind-the-scenes information. However, they also recognise that they may be being used by the leaker for an ulterior motive. An online sports writer for RTÉ Sport said: "It is tricky when you are leaked information, because you know the person that has leaked you the information has a certain agenda." This description shows the significance of *steering* as a distinct defensive mediatization strategy, which focuses on an organisation guiding a journalist towards their objectives. It links with Sugden and Tomlinson's point (2007) that a long-held criticism of sports journalists has been their close proximity to their subject matter. Likewise, McEnnis (2021) argues that sports journalists 'strive for editorial independence yet are too close to their sources to the point of collusion' (969).

Participants said individuals do not leak information to journalists for no reason but always have a goal in mind, either short-term or long-term. Leakers hope that the journalist will use confidential information in a manner which benefits the leaker or inflicts harm on someone else. Oftentimes, respondents said leaks come from sources who are dissatisfied with a perceived injustice and want to help correct it or draw attention towards the injustice. An Irish Times sportswriter explained that "leaks happen all the time in sports journalism" but many journalists were simply "being used" and "doing the team's bidding." He added that journalists need to be aware of when they are being used by a leaker: "You have to question their motivation. They want to run a story that meets their needs and objectives."

Specifically with regards to the IOC, participants admitted there was a fear and scepticism within the organisation at the prospect of information being leaked and the threat of whistleblowers. An investigative reporter explained: "I have tried to put pressure on whistleblowers, but they [the IOC] warn their people [not to speak to journalists]." This individual, who has produced a number of investigations that were highly critical of the IOC, said that there are many who wish to speak to journalists, but are afraid to do so. "There are some people who are in favour of what we are doing

and criticise the IOC. But they don't dare to talk in public about it, because they might lose their jobs." This response highlights the fear and distrust of journalists from within the IOC and how staff are 'steered' away from speaking to the media.

Leaking as a defensive mediatization strategy is also evidenced in less pernicious manners. A less extreme version of leaking is the decision by media managers to send information to particular journalists, and not to others. This *selective* nature of information distribution targets influential journalists who work for publications that can have a large impact (Suggs 2016). As explained by an online journalist for RTÉ Sport: "Some sports organisations will send information to every journalist, but others are a bit more selective over who they send information to. Different sports organisations have different approaches over who gets certain stories." This approach is a useful example of *steering* at the micro level, with the IOC wishing to set the agenda by who they choose to send information to. The IOC takes into account the audience of the publication and the impact of the journalist with whom they are seeding the information. An Irish Independent sportswriter offered a warning to his colleagues however, highlighting the need to be wary of why they are being given information: "You get leaks all the time, but it's what you decide to do with that information that really matters. You have to be aware of the fact that as a journalist, you are being used by the leaker." This point echoes McEnnis (2021) who observed how sports journalists pride themselves on maintaining professionalism: 'public interest, truth, accuracy and impartiality were frequent descriptors of professionalism' (968).

A second example of *steering* at the micro level is the issuing of ready-to-use media packs/press releases by sports organisations to journalists. As discussed in the findings chapter, this is the practice whereby sports organisations will email press releases filled with information, photos, videos, infographics, and statistics to journalists. Journalists can use this content for their stories, particularly for use online and on social media. This is common practice at all major sports organisations (Sherwood et al. 2016) and the IOC has, likewise, become sophisticated and professionalised in how it issues these media packs to journalists. As described by the online sports editor at RTE: "Sports organisations have become such experts in their communications. [They] will craft and perfect a press release to such a high standard nowadays that media publications can almost publish them straight away without the need to change anything." He added that the easier

a sports organisation makes a press release to use, "the more likely a journalist will use it." Participants said that press releases and media packs were an effective way for the IOC to gain extra media coverage of their events. Crucially, it allows them the opportunity to frame events in the way they wish.

In effect, this is evidence of steering journalists towards covering Olympic events in a specific way. As referenced by a media manager interviewed in this study, they cannot "write journalists' stories for them." What they can control, however, is exerting influence over what journalists *think about*. One Olympics journalist for *InsideTheGames.com* said that the IOC's press releases can come across as "Stalinist" by how one-sided and tone deaf they read. He said that such press releases were nothing more than highly produced "propaganda" which many journalists copied and reprinted word-for-word: "Each sports organisation will naturally always try and put their own spin on things to reflect positively on their organisation. But it becomes ridiculous."

Participants said there was a danger with the over-reliance many journalists had on using these "ready-to-use" IOC media packs and information. Due to modern sports journalists being overworked and burdened with deadlines, particularly online journalists (McEnnis 2016), they do not have the time to critically verify many of the press releases which they are sent. It is quicker and easier to "copy and paste" press releases and use the quotes, photos and interviews which are offered. Many Olympic journalists today do not have the ability to conduct fact-checking, verification and obtaining multiple sources (Robertson 2023). Therefore, this study's findings show they feel no choice but to accept and regurgitate press releases which are highly professionalised by way of writing, presentation and the depth of content they provide. An Olympics correspondent bluntly admitted that: "We have to go along with it, because we can't go out and verify the information ourselves." In this specific response, the participants' own choice of words "go along with" clearly underscore the significance of *steering* as an effective defensive mediatization strategy. Journalists are cognisant of their professional duties to fact-check and verify sources, but due to increasingly difficult working conditions, feel no option but to go along with information given to them.

Evidence from this study highlights that the IOC uses the issuing of press releases and media packs to journalists as a specific defensive mediatization tactic. It is a clear example of *steering* at the micro level, showing how a sports organisation wishes to steer journalists towards covering events in a particular way. The IOC recognises how journalists who are overburdened will often be forced to accept and reproduce the stories, quotes and interviews which the IOC sends them. This is due to a lack of time and resources for journalists to verify information, fact-check and secure their own interviews. As summarised by an investigative journalist interviewed for this study: "If journalists just spread what the IOC is publishing, then they have achieved their goal. Their propaganda is published."

5.8 Masquerading as journalists: content creators and future Olympic press boxes

In the absence of full-time, specialised Olympic journalists due to the impact of defensive mediatization, a new actor has emerged into their space within sports media, which is content creators. Coinciding with the rise of platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, there has been a growth in the number of online content creators attending sporting events in a media capacity (O'Neill 2024). Participants were keen to highlight this trend and the impact it may have on Olympic journalism in the future. Content creators are categorised as members of the media who create online digital content, including videos, photos, Instagram Stories, Reels and TikToks posted to their own personal accounts, or accounts belonging to an organisation which has hired them (Radmann et al. 2021). There is a limited amount of research on content creators in sport due to their recent arrival to the world of sports media (Radmann et al. 2021; McEnnis 2023; Harry and Hammit 2024).

In his study of popular football influencer Fabrizio Romano, McEnnis (2023) argues that content creators are changing the boundaries of sports reporting, stating that the influx of these new online producers is 'professionalising sports journalism on social media' (430). The IOC, like many modern sports organisations, has utilised content creators to deliver coverage of their events. Discussing the use of content creators and influencers, a communications manager at the British Olympic Committee said: "With influencers, there has been a huge opportunity working alongside them. This is because of the traffic they drive and the influence they can have [on younger

audiences].” An attraction for sports organisations is the inherently positive framing of the content produced. Content creators hired by sports organisations primarily seek to celebrate the events, athletes, and sporting competitions which they are paid to cover (McEnnis 2023). The presence of critical coverage is largely absent. This raises considerations in attempting to distinguish between online content and legitimate sports journalism.

Journalism is defined as the gathering and dissemination of information which is objective, impartial and fact-based (Schudson 2001). The work produced by content creators, meanwhile, does not hold to the same standards, instead prioritising a fun, entertaining, positive approach which is visually impactful and celebrates the subject they are covering. Highlighting the lack of any critical social media postings by influencer Fabrizio Romano about the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, McEnnis (2023) argues that ‘the normative assumption that sports journalists should scrutinise power and/or highlight social injustice does not always apply to all practitioners in all contexts’ (430). The infiltration of content creators, according to participants in this study, is a source of frustration for traditional sports journalists. They view the work of content creators as public relations material. A sports journalist for the BBC said: “Content creation… I don't mean this in a sniffy way, but it's not sports writing. It’s not journalism. It’s not critical coverage, it’s being a fanboy or a fangirl.” The contradiction, however, is the shared space that journalists and content creators occupy at sporting events. Both are given similar media accreditation by organisations including the IOC, despite journalists and content creators producing work that is fundamentally different and often opposed. A by-product of defensive mediatization has been an exodus of journalists from Olympic media coinciding with the growth of these new media members. This was a serious concern for sports journalists, as they highlighted a shift in priorities in the production of Olympic news content from accuracy towards engagement. This has the potential to exacerbate the spread of misinformation and the proliferation of oversimplified narratives of sporting events (Radmann et al. 2021).

An IOC communications manager explained that a key reason why sports organisations now use content creators is because of the alternative types of online engagement which they can harness. This engagement is different from that garnered by their own in-house content and by independent journalists. They said: “We are moving away from more traditional numbers into more meaningful

online engagement." Online influencers create familiar bonds with their audiences. These parasocial online friendships are a core aspect of influencer content (Radmann et al. 2021). By employing influencers to create content about events such as the Olympics, sports organisations including the IOC co-opt these online friendships, creating bonds with audiences online through the medium of a friendly face which an influencer can offer. Fans of the influencer will be more open to becoming fans of the Olympics by association. This represents the "more meaningful online engagement" which the IOC communications manager referred to. This is a deeper type of online engagement which journalists and traditional media sources cannot offer. These findings contrast the decreasing levels of trust from younger audiences in journalists with a preference for information delivered by their favourite online social media personalities (Anđelić 2021).

The emergence of these new actors into a space previously occupied solely by sports journalists has side-lined the importance of journalists for the IOC. Mirer (2019) explains that the growth of in-house reporters and content creators means 'a new occupational group [is seeking] recognition within the profession of journalism' (73). The boundaries of what constitutes a sports journalist are changing. The dissemination of information to audiences and the production of sports content is accessible to all on a shifting continuum of professionalism (Culver and Mirer 2015). An Olympics media manager said that the IOC wished to create "a deeper level of interaction with the Olympics brand" and an effective way of achieving this was by hiring external content creators. He summarised their use by sports organisations: "We use content to drive fans across a journey. You might go from being a follower [of the individual influencer] on Twitter, or Instagram, or TikTok, to being part of our [Olympics] fan community. We want to move fans through that journey, so they get to the point where they are buying a t-shirt, or jumping on a train to attend the Olympics in Paris in 2024. That is engagement at the highest possible level." This demonstrates the benefit of online content creators and influencers for sports organisations and draws attention to their advantages compared to traditional media coverage by journalists.

Participants said fewer Olympic journalists, more content creators and increasing numbers of in-house journalists sitting in press boxes at sporting events could be an indication of future trends. Traditional media are in a weakened position and in their place has been a growth of content which cloaks itself under the pretence of being journalism. As O'Boyle and Gallagher (2023) state: 'the

line between content produced by professional journalists and that produced by individuals who may be masquerading as journalists has blurred' (674). This has a significant impact on sports journalists' assertions of professional authority. It also raises deeper considerations pertaining to the unique value of sports journalism. Results from this study suggest that the IOC recognises how younger audiences place more value in content produced by social media personalities than traditional forms of sports journalism (Metcalf 2016). Reflecting on how sports organisations are actively 'deprioritizing media needs' (Suggs 2016, 262), a sports writer for The Guardian argued the term *in-house journalist* was "an oxymoron". He said journalists are seeing their work "co-opted". Pointing out how sports organisations have "borrowed" the language of journalism, a sports journalist for The Daily Telegraph added: "It's very funny how sports teams say: 'oh, we have an exclusive interview with Paul Pogba on our official club YouTube channel.' And it's kind of like, well, *he's your employee.* How much of an *exclusive* can this actually be?"

The emergence of content creators and in-house journalists — and their presence at sporting events — raises challenges for the legitimacy of the work produced by Olympic journalists. Often forced to defend their work against accusations of a lack of professionalism and objectivity, the proliferation of content creators covering sporting events raises the possibility of further criticism against sports journalists (McEnnis 2023). A blurring of lines between what a content creator is and what a professional sports journalist looks like has emerged. This vagueness in terms of professional occupation is complicated further when sports journalists also work as content creators, and content creators produce sports journalism (Mirer 2019b). A sports journalist for the Washington Post said he has produced branded content on behalf of sports organisations, due to the precarious nature of the industry: "There are many strands of being a sports journalist today. Some of what I do is sports writing, some is investigative journalism, and some is probably branded content creation." This practice has become more commonplace due to a lack of permanent employment opportunities (Press Gazette 2024) which has led to a rise in freelance media work. Many content creators write articles that can be defined as sports journalism. While some sports journalists also produce online social media content which could be classified as work typically associated with content creators. This study's findings show that for the IOC, the benefit of employing content creators is largely positive. This is due to the level of online engagement they

bring, particularly from younger audiences, and the positive, unscrupulous framing which their content is grounded in.

With content creators now seemingly masquerading as journalists (O'Boyle and Gallagher 2023) at events such as the Olympic Games, it raises the possibility of further critiques of sports journalists. This criticism has been rooted in accusations of lacking professionalism and objectivity (Andrews 2005; Boyle 2006). With audiences struggling to distinguish between content creators and sports journalists (Radmann et al. 2021), these historic criticisms could be even more pronounced. Findings from this study partially affirm Mirer's (2019) view that a fundamental challenge for sports journalists remains 'setting the profession apart from the amateurs and partisans that populate digital spaces' (74). Findings demonstrate that there remains a considerable hesitancy among Olympic journalists to share spaces with content creators, whom they do not consider as equal contemporaries. The IOC do not dwell on the impact of these professional overlaps, focussing instead on the added value each can offer towards its objectives. Increasingly these objectives are being met with a growing dependency on restrictive media strategies which inhibit and obstruct the work of journalists. In the absence of Olympic journalists, new actors are populating the Olympic media landscape, producing content which affirms a positive narrative about the Games and the organisation which stages it.

5.9 Beyond the framework: Influences outside defensive mediatization

The defensive mediatization model adopted in this study offers a valuable, synchronic framework for understanding how journalists covering the Olympics are impacted by institutional pressures from the IOC and attempt their own protective strategies in response. However, this model does not fully account for wider professional and structural shifts which have shaped the evolving nature of Olympic journalists' relationship with the IOC. The model illustrates a static, present-day picture of current practices regarding how Olympic journalists are impacted by top-down control, such as access restrictions and tightly-managed press operations. But a sole reliance on this model risks overstating the IOC's agency while underplaying other forces transforming the journalistic field. It is important to acknowledge and discuss these wider influences which are beyond the IOC's control and exist beyond the framework of defensive mediatization.

One such force is the broader economic restructuring of the media industry, which has significantly impacted the viability of high-quality sports journalism today. Hardin and Billings (2022) describe the present state of sports journalism as 'a fracturing profession on shifting terrain' (395). As a number of participants noted, shrinking newsroom resources, a decline in the number of specialised Olympic correspondents and the growing dependence on freelance or 'pack reporting' (Murtaugh 2021) have each had a sizeable impact on how the Games are covered. These changes are not IOC-driven, but are consequences of a global trend of precarity and cost-efficiency in journalism. This environment of cutbacks, lower circulation numbers and 'belt tightening' (Stock 2009, 58) has made it increasingly difficult for reporters to pursue investigative or critical Olympic coverage, irrespective of the IOC's influence. This has resulted in greater reliance on official sources due to logistical necessity rather than strategic submission (Sampedro et al. 2018). These pressures fall beyond the scope of the defensive mediatization model but were raised by participants, particularly by legacy media journalists and those participants who had covered Olympic cycles across multiple decades.

The professional norms and routines of journalism, such as the rapidly demanding emphasis on immediacy, a 24/7 news cycle and the social media-driven pressure for online engagement, have also reshaped how journalists interact with the Olympic system (Peña 2024). The IOC's media strategies do operate within this environment, but they did not manufacture it. Olympic journalists are not simply reacting to IOC control, they are also adapting to wider changes in terms of audience expectations and platform demands (Rojas-Torrijos and Nölleke 2023). These often favour softer content, positive, inspiring athlete profiles, or viral moments (Ramon and Tulloch 2021; Denisova 2023) instead of deep structural critiques of Olympic topics. Several participants reflected on time constraints which discourage deeper reporting and reinforce a reluctant dependence on pre-packaged IOC material. These behaviours and reporting concessions by journalists are not directly instigated by the IOC, but are responses to a wider evolution of industry-wide journalistic changes. These adaptations to journalistic norms to meet audience demands for content which is lively, engaging and social-media driven (Vázquez-Herrero et al. 2023) has dramatically altered journalists' relationship with the IOC. These media trends and changes in audience behaviour,

although frequently capitalised upon by the IOC for its own benefit, were not maliciously created by the sports organisation itself.

A third factor influencing the IOC's relationship with journalists beyond what is captured by the defensive mediatization model has been the rise of athlete-driven Olympic media content and direct-to-audience communication, such as social media and athlete-run content channels. This shift has transformed the Olympic media landscape through decentralising control over narratives (Geurin and McNary 2021), thereby reducing traditional gatekeeping roles enjoyed by journalists. Athletes today bypass mainstream media to share their journey, providing immediate, interactive updates and personal stories (Winslow et al. 2024), especially in the build-up to and during major events such as the Games (Robertson 2018). This trend alters the dynamics between journalists and the IOC in several ways. Firstly, it complicates journalists' access to exclusive or meaningful athlete insight, as much of this content is self-published on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok.

Secondly, it places additional pressure on journalists to amplify, or respond to, this athlete-generated content, rather than independently initiating coverage (Ning et al. 2024). Olympic journalists provide fewer exclusives and must fill this void by providing reactionary coverage which is first published on the athlete's social media channels. As noted by McCarra (2010), these changes have 'done away with the assumption that journalists can be a priesthood who own a sacred knowledge.' Thirdly, it shifts audience attention toward personal, human-interest content which may not align with critical or investigative reporting objectives (Robertson 2024). Several participants said social media has blurred boundaries between journalism, PR and fandom, changing how Olympic stories are framed and consumed. Again, these developments in terms of athlete self-branding are largely external to IOC influence, even if the IOC often adapts by amplifying Olympians' content (Xu et al. 2024). The IOC reacts positively to this trend provided Olympians' self-produced content is positive, maintains values of Olympism and reflects well on the Games and the IOC (Peña 2024). The rise of athlete self-promotion via independent media platforms reflects broader technological and cultural changes in media production and consumption, contributing to a realignment of power in Olympic storytelling (Brison and Geurin 2021). This phenomenon further challenges the explanatory scope of the defensive mediatization

model in this study, which focuses on journalists' responses to top-down organisational pressures. Instead, these athlete-driven dynamics represent pressures which reshape the journalistic field from the outside in.

Therefore, while the defensive mediatization model remains an effective lens through which to analyse journalistic responses to IOC power, it must be situated within a wider ecology of influences, such as economic precarity in the journalism industry, digital media pressures, and changes in sports figures' self-created online content, which all shape how Olympic reportage is produced and framed. Observing both institutional pressures and wider, structural shifts within journalism and sport, provides a fuller picture of the dynamics at play. Doing so acknowledges the conceptual boundaries of the defensive mediatization model adopted, and provides more accuracy in terms of the IOC's direct influence and agency in the media strategies it imposes. Crucially, this approach also illuminates how the IOC capitalises upon wider influences which negatively affect journalists. The IOC cannot shoulder blame for cutbacks in newsrooms, increasing precarity in journalism more widely, or athletes' desire to share their own digital content directly with fans. However, the defensive mediatization strategies described in this chapter clearly show proactive decisions made by the organisation which capitalises upon these trends in a vicious cycle which recurs.

5.10 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed and analysed the empirical findings from this research study. By synthesising these findings alongside theoretical insights from existing literature, this chapter has elucidated key fault lines in the working relationships between the IOC and sports journalists. I have analysed the presence of both offensive and defensive mediatization strategies, building on Nölleke et al.'s (2021) initial research. By using their framework taken from an institutionalist tradition across the macro, meso and micro levels, this chapter showed that mediatization is not simply a one-way process of accommodation. Rather, the IOC employs specific tactics to avoid and control media attention in tandem with offensive adaptations. With regards to their treatment of journalists, the IOC demonstrated that these strategies often overlap, are complementary and exist on a continuum. It was the objective of this study to respond to Nölleke et al.'s (2021)

suggestion that 'journalism studies can benefit from an extended concept of mediatization' (753). Research on defensive mediatization has been 'widely-neglected' (743) historically and differentiating offensive and defensive strategies with new empirical evidence helps strengthen the concept.

I suggested that the reason why the IOC's relationship with sports journalists has deteriorated has been the successful application of different defensive strategies. The IOC once enjoyed a more open, cordial relationship with journalists because they viewed them as a necessity to promote the Olympic brand. This builds on Heinecke's (2014) argument that organisations which deem their media visibility as insufficient or inappropriate will engage in proactive, offensive mediatization strategies. Over time, however, this relationship has fragmented and space has opened up between both parties. In this space, my findings draw attention to the mistrust and scepticism which currently exists. Findings suggest the IOC engages in defensive media strategies not because they view their media visibility as lacking, but because they view themselves as 'inappropriately covered' (Nölleke et al. 2021, 742) as a result of what they perceive as low-quality journalism. This analysis demonstrates a clear switch from the IOC, moving away from courting the attention of journalists because they depended on their influence, to initiating policies which attempted to discard them.

In the past, the IOC's relationship with sports journalists could be categorised by offensive strategies which sought to 'accommodate the needs of the mass media to gain public attention' (Nölleke et al. 2021, 739). They enjoyed a co-existence where accommodating one another benefited both parties by way of positive press coverage and a higher degree of access. This aligns with Hjarvard's (2013) assertion that mediatization is concurrently embedded and interdependent. Over time, however, the IOC slowly applied a series of intentional tactics aimed at deflecting, impeding and obscuring media attention. Evidence from this study highlights how the IOC *persists* with old-fashioned media tactics such as embargoes and prioritising journalists who work for legacy media instead of online publications and sports blogs. The IOC *shields* journalists by denying interview requests, creating hostility by the behaviour of media officers, requesting pre-approved questions, and the consistent use of spokespeople instead of IOC officials. The IOC *immunizes* journalists with a direct-to-consumer business model, the use of in-house media and

the threat of libel/defamation letters. The IOC also *immunizes* journalists by providing extensive media training for officials and Olympians. This chapter proposed a new, fourth category of defensive mediatization, labelled *steering*. Examples of *steering* include the repeated use of Zoom press conferences, leaking information, and hiring journalists in what this study labels the 'poacher-turned-gamekeeper' trend. Further examples include banning journalists from press events, issuing media packs, and the courtship of favourable, pro-IOC journalists.

However, perhaps one of the most significant examples of shielding demonstrated by the IOC throughout this study was evidenced in the data-gathering process itself. Namely, numerous participants' reticence to elaborate on the full extent of how they impede journalists at the macro level of social structures. This study pinpoints a significant contradiction whereby IOC officials signalled their respect and admiration for Olympic journalists, while simultaneously acknowledging their need to limit the impact of their work. Many IOC officials who worked in communications positions stressed how they wished to "work alongside" sports journalists and assist them. However, these individuals would later describe methods which distanced these journalists from their subjects. On the one hand, IOC officials offered partial explanations for why these policies were necessary, namely because they blamed journalists providing inaccurate and negative coverage. However, these IOC officials were also hesitant to spend significant time on this topic during interviews. These findings underscore the underlying contradiction between the work of communications staff at sports organisations and journalists which report on them and their events. While these individuals overlap in their skill sets, receive similar media-related education and training and produce content which is highly comparable, both are driven by competing objectives which serve entirely different audiences.

Similarly, these findings specify how the IOC's antiquated traditions, history, culture and insular nature results in its communications staff viewing outsiders with scepticism and trepidation. Staff at the organisation claimed to respect the work of journalists, but this pretence falls short by the IOC's unwillingness to accept accountability. Organisations accept accountability by welcoming the scrutiny provided by journalists (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2021). The IOC's insistence on implementing increasingly defensive, restrictive media tactics demonstrate its unwillingness to accept dissent from external parties. Findings from this study suggest that sports journalists

admonish the IOC for a failure of transparency and an antagonistic treatment of the press, whereas the IOC justifies these strategies due to a perceived failure of these journalists to deliver fair, accurate reporting. In this sense, the IOC dismisses the role of journalists to provide impartial, critical coverage, but still wishes to utilise them as a collaborator in their objectives.

The next chapter will bring this study to a close, highlighting the limitations of this research, taking into account the study's setbacks, unexpected outcomes and the significance of its findings for practitioners working in sports journalism and at sports organisations. In this final chapter I will discuss the limits of inspecting Olympic journalism in isolation and the IOC as one single sports organisation. However, I also argue that this specificity offers scope for further research within Olympic studies and the wider sports communication discipline. In particular, I suggest future research utilises this study's empirical findings as the basis for studies which incorporate other Olympic stakeholders, such as sponsors and fans. Similarly, additional investigations which examine the presence, impact and consequences of defensive mediatization are suggested in areas beyond the Olympics and sports journalism.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

The final chapter brings this study to a conclusion, examining its key contributions, practical and theoretical implications for stakeholders, limitations of this research and potential opportunities for future academic studies. This chapter begins by returning to the study's research questions in order to reiterate its aims and discuss how they were addressed. This study tasked itself with seeking a deeper understanding of the role of the modern sports journalist. It did this by closely examining their duties covering the largest sporting event in the world, the Olympic Games, and the media's relationship with the powerful organisation which stages it, the International Olympic Committee (IOC). As such, this study was a response to the substantial absence of research which explores Olympic journalism (Flindall and Wassong 2017; Robertson 2024). Inherent in this overarching research question about the role of the modern sports journalist have been other considerations which are reflected upon in the opening section of this chapter. These sub-research questions concern how sports journalists should cover an organisation which they depend on for access and the IOC's purpose for engaging with traditional media. This study also addressed how modern sports organisations develop and implement their communications strategies and how journalists can combat tactics (defensive mediatization strategies) which are designed to impede and inhibit their work.

Next, there is a short discussion about the knowledge gap which this study sought to address. This gap includes an absence of in-depth media studies about the IOC and insufficient research which examines sports organisations under the specific lens of mediatization (Frandsen 2020). After this, I provide a short review of this study's most significant findings with regards to defensive mediatization strategies and how they impact the professional ideology of sports journalists. This offers important context and background for the next section of this final chapter, which is a discussion about the theoretical and practical implications of this study's results. Outcomes from this study are highly relevant for today's sports journalists, for the IOC and for other large sports organisations. As such, this section discusses ways in which different practitioners including journalists, media managers and communications officials can apply the insights derived from this

study about their overlapping professional dynamics. This chapter concludes by acknowledging the limitations of this research study, namely a lack of gender diversity in the make-up of participants which is reflective of a male-dominated sports media environment (Price 2015). I also offer recommendations for future academic research. Findings from this study can be used as a foundation to examine media relations and communications strategies at other large-scale sports organisations outside the Olympic world such as FIFA, World Rugby and the National Football League (NFL). Similarly, this study's expanded view of defensive mediatization, incorporating its fourth category *steering*, can be applied further in journalistic settings beyond sport.

6.2 Study's aims, research questions and addressing the research gap

This study tasked itself with providing a deeper understanding of what it means to be a professional sports journalist today. Sports journalists face a number of difficulties which has made the profession increasingly precarious in modern times (Buzzelli et al. 2020). Therefore, this study sought new insights about the current state and future development of the profession by examining the working conditions and routines of Olympic sports journalists who cover the most significant international sports event in the world and the organisation which stages it. McEnnis (2021) aptly noted that sports journalists aim for editorial independence but are 'too close to their sources to the point of collusion' (969). Building on this observation, paying close attention to the term 'collusion', this study sought deeper insights into how today's sports journalists perform their jobs reporting on an organisation which they depend on for access. This study was inspired by the unique situation of sports journalists who, as noted by Andrews (2005), often must perform a dual role of hyping a sporting occasion while simultaneously being critical of those who organise it. On the one hand, sports journalists are accused of being cheerleaders and fans with typewriters (English 2016; McEnnis 2021), while their professional duty also requires them to act as a fierce critic of sporting matters. This study sought to explore this sense of duality and contention which has always been at the forefront of sports journalism.

Similarly, this study also wanted to examine these issues from the opposing perspective. In order to understand how Olympic journalists perform their jobs, we must also understand what function they serve for the IOC. It was only possible to understand the two parties' present relationship by

speaking with those involved, observing how their dynamic has changed over time, and noting the reasons for these changes. This study was driven by a desire to understand what purpose sports organisations have for continuing to engage with traditional sports journalists, despite now having the in-house tools to produce their own content. This study sought to understand why, and to what degree, the IOC still sees a purpose for accommodating journalists, despite evidence of a transformative evolution of the previously mutually-beneficial relationship between sports organisations and the media (Sherwood et al. 2016). In order to keep media spotlight away, this study found that the IOC has applied a host of restrictive measures across the macro, meso and micro levels, identified as defensive mediatization strategies. These measures (persistence, immunization, shielding, steering) aim to inhibit the work of sports journalists. This framework of defensive mediatization, which provides a logical rationale for why the IOC's relationship with journalists has become more constrained, provided answers to this study's research questions in a number of ways.

An initial research question of this study concerns the state and health of sports journalism as a profession today. By examining the current working conditions and routines of journalists who cover the Olympics and the IOC, we see that journalists face a number of difficulties in their working environment, which have been previously alluded to (Weedon et al. 2018, McEnnis 2021). Wider trends in sports journalism beyond the Olympic world show that there are less secure job opportunities, lower pay, and an increased workload for today's sports journalists (McEnnis 2016). Findings in this study attest to this. As a result of these conditions, many Olympic sports journalists have left the profession, others have been made redundant and some have switched sides to work for sporting organisations instead. These findings illustrate two important points: Firstly, the difficult working environment of sports journalists today also exists within the Olympic world. Secondly, the IOC has made working as an Olympic sports journalist even more challenging with the application of defensive mediatization strategies to inhibit and impede their work. The ramifications of these difficult conditions results in more Olympic sports journalists leaving the industry, an even greater workload for those who continue in the profession, and less balanced media coverage of the Games due to a growing absence of critical voices.

A second research question guiding this study was why sports organisations such as the IOC choose to apply defensive mediatization in the first place. Findings in this study attest to Nölleke's (2021) observation that defensive strategies are inspired by a desire to uphold an organisation's reputation, preserve their self-image, and aid the organisation in their strategic objectives. This study shows that the IOC applies defensive mediatization in a host of different ways because they fear the reputational damage which journalists can inflict on them. It is a strategy of self-preservation and self-protection. The IOC, more and more over time, has viewed engagement with journalists as a risk which should be avoided unless necessary. Indeed, one journalist who has produced TV documentaries investigating different Olympic scandals argued that today the IOC are "afraid" of journalists.

This is not to imply that the IOC sees no purpose whatsoever for journalists. Respected media entities including the BBC, the New York Times and CNN still aid the IOC thanks to their audience reach and trust. As noted by Nölleke et al. (2021), the IOC applies both offensive *and* defensive strategies in tandem with one another. My findings suggest, however, that the IOC's increasingly conservative, defence-minded approach is due to this fear and scepticism of journalists, combined with the in-house capabilities which the IOC now possess. They can fulfil the role of journalists by hiring in-house journalists. They can also neutralise journalists, and potentially silence critical ones, by hiring them for their own communications departments. The IOC can also replace the need for engaging with journalists by using new actors, such as content creators and online social media influencers. This is a new way that the IOC reaches audiences and builds up support for the Olympics. In the past, this was achieved via intermediaries such as journalists. Now, hype and publicity can be generated by content creators who maintain a positive and one-sided message which commends the IOC (Robertson 2018). This point emphasises a key underlying motivation for the application of defensive mediatization highlighted in this study, which is the IOC's dissatisfaction with present media coverage. Nölleke et al. (2021) suggested that organisations apply mediatization strategies when they are unhappy with the quantity of media coverage of their activities. My study offers evidence that the IOC is driven to block and impede journalists due to a deep frustration of unfair and unbalanced reporting. One IOC participant argued that the organisation's negative public image was cultivated due to "poor journalism." These findings therefore demonstrate that organisations apply defensive mediatization strategies as a direct

response to their dissatisfaction with work produced by journalists which they perceive as low-quality, unfair and, at times, unethical.

The final research question guiding this project concerns the impact of defensive mediatization on sports journalists and how they can combat such tactics. Participants offered some, but limited, examples of how sports journalists can fight back against strategies that are designed to impede them. This adds further weight to the difficult and precarious nature of the profession, which has witnessed an exodus of journalists leaving the industry in recent years. Many participants in this study acknowledged how a power balance has been tipped in favour of large, well-resourced sports organisations. As previously highlighted by Sherwood et al. (2016), modern sports organisations have the ability to control media narratives more than ever before. Journalists said they are often at the whims of those who can decide when and where they get access and who they can interview. They often have no choice but to regurgitate press releases from the IOC because today's Olympic journalists do not have the time or resources to perform core journalistic roles (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2021) such as obtaining multiple sources, verifying information thoroughly, and securing their own one-on-one interviews. These findings paint a difficult picture of what it means to work as an Olympic journalist today. Participants who remain in the profession spoke about the "vocational" aspect of journalism which they still felt. These sports journalists said that despite increasingly difficult working conditions covering the Olympics and the IOC, they felt compelled to do so out of a duty and responsibility. However, findings illustrate that Olympic journalists struggle to combat these restrictive tactics with practical solutions.

This study was motivated by a desire to alleviate research gaps which exist in three key areas. Firstly, a lack of in-depth knowledge about Olympic journalists. This involves understanding the motivations, working habits, frustrations, and aspirations of those members of the media who cover the Games and the IOC. Secondly, an absence of research which specifically examines sports organisations under the lens of mediatization. There has been a growing body of scholarship which has utilised mediatization to better understand sport and to scrutinise the mediatization of journalism (Strömbäck 2011; Marcinkowski 2014; Strömbäck and Esser 2014; Kunelius and Reunanen 2016). However, there has not been a significant depth of research that applies the theory of mediatization specifically to understanding sports organisations. Thirdly, this study was

motivated by a lack of in-depth literature that examines the International Olympic Committee, the world's largest and most prestigious sporting organisation (Boykoff 2022). While there have been numerous studies into journalism which covers the Olympic Games (Flindall and Wassong 2017; Gutierrez and Bettine 2020; Robertson 2024) and media coverage of Olympic athletes (Kristiansen and Hanstad 2012, Kovacs and Doczi 2019), there has been a notable lack of research which examines the IOC and its relationship with journalists. Combined together, this study has therefore sought to contribute new knowledge towards these three areas where there has been a significant lack of academic focus. By providing new insights into these areas, it is hoped that this study can contribute a deeper understanding of an important journalistic subject area and shed new light on a closely-guarded organisation which has increasingly attempted to conceal its internal operations from public scrutiny.

6.3 Summary of key results and contributions

This section provides a short overview of this study's key findings. This summary of its main contributions provides an important foundation to discuss the limitations of this study, practical and theoretical implications, and as context before offering suggestions for future research. In the findings chapter, I outlined four key themes which emerged from the 50 interviews conducted. These themes are: Olympic sports journalists' professional ideology, mediatization strategies, the IOC's motivation for engaging with journalists, and lastly the adversarial/symbiotic relationship between the IOC and journalists. Brought together, these themes culminated to paint a picture of the IOC's relationship with journalists and, crucially, how it has evolved over time. In the past, participants explained that the IOC enjoyed a more open, engaging relationship with journalists. This was due to factors such as the IOC's precarious financial position in previous decades and the heightened power and influence of journalism as a profession during these periods. Combined together, these factors resulted in an increased dependency on journalists to provide coverage of the IOC and the Olympic Games. Findings in this study show that gradually the IOC began to bypass journalists, co-opt their functions by producing its own content and apply measures to inhibit the media. This illustrates Buzzelli et al.'s (2020) view that modern sports organisations can reach their target audience 'without the need for a media middleman' (419). Owing to multi-million euro broadcast deals negotiated during the 1980s, the IOC retained increased levels of

power, influence and profitability, therefore lowering its dependency on external media to enhance its image and reputation. Instead, the organisation's focus switched to broadcast partners and in-house media which could yield media coverage which the IOC itself could control, manage and dictate.

These findings demonstrate the significant impact of the IOC on shaping the professional ideology of Olympic sports journalists. In this study, Olympic sports journalists discussed contrasting motivations for covering the Games. Some journalists are driven by an excitement to cover sporting matters, others felt a duty to perform watchdog journalism and hold the IOC accountable. These findings help us to understand the mentality of Olympic sports journalists. However, these findings become significant when we introduce the application of defensive mediatization on these journalists. Throughout the discussion chapter of this dissertation, I provided in-depth evidence and analysis of defensive mediatization. across the macro, meso and micro levels. Using Nölleke et al.'s (2021) initial framework, my study gives explicit examples of the three categories of defensive mediatization: *persistence, shielding and immunization*. Adding to this, my study contributes a new fourth category labelled *steering*. These findings are the most consequential in this study, as they provide a clear rationale for why the IOC's relationship with journalists deteriorated over time. Combined with the IOC's new ability to produce their own in-house content, the enforcement of more explicit defensive strategies to impede journalists has completely altered the two parties' relationship. It has created a growing sense of fear and distrust between the IOC and sports journalists which exists today.

Firstly, at the *macro level*, I presented examples of persistence: media embargos and limits on the number of questions allowed at press conferences. Examples of shielding included the increased level of in-house content produced by the IOC. Immunization was displayed with the IOC's policy of hiring content creators and social media influencers. Secondly, at the *meso level*, this study discussed the highly professionalised communications department at the IOC as an example of persistence. Shielding was evidenced at the meso level with the act of denying interview requests, seeking pre-approved questions, and the continued use of spokesmen at press conferences by the IOC. Thirdly, at the *micro level*, this study discussed extensive evidence of both shielding and immunization. Examples of shielding include banning journalists from IOC press conferences and

purposefully not responding to journalists' emails and calls. Immunization was evidenced by the IOC providing robust media training to its officials and employees.

This study adds further evidence of defensive mediatization by proposing its unique new category of *steering*. Steering is defined as the act of guiding journalists towards desirable ends which meet an organisation's internal objectives (O'Boyle and Gallagher 2023). At the *macro level*, examples of steering included the use of public relations as an organisational function. At the *meso level*, we see examples of steering in the hiring of in-house journalists in what I label as the poacher-turned-gamekeeper trend. It was also evidenced by the continued use of Zoom instead of in-person media events. Finally, at the *micro level*, steering was evidenced by the leaking of information to favourable journalists who are guilty of 'overselling the virtues of the Olympics because their job depends on it' (Robertson 2024, 91). Altogether, this study provides extensive evidence across the macro, meso, and micro levels of defensive mediatization which seek to inhibit journalists. Some strategies are more effective than others, but combined they represent a strategic and intentional approach of keeping journalists away and making their jobs more difficult.

This study found that the underlying motivations for why the IOC employ these strategies are to minimise negative coverage, control their own narrative with in-house content, and uphold and preserve a positive self-image. Over time, the IOC has viewed accommodating journalists as an unnecessary risk. This has resulted in the IOC acting more measured, savvy and conservative in its dealings with the media. It has created disincentives for sports journalists covering the Olympics and made it more difficult for them to report on the IOC. As such, many have chosen to leave journalism, others have been made redundant in their roles, and many have decided to switch sides and work for sports organisations instead. This further strengthens the position of the IOC. It results in less negative coverage of their work and creates a situation where they can hire disaffected journalists to work in-house instead. As such former sports journalists, knowledgeable about their own industry, have their skills harnessed to further neutralise former colleagues. This validates Nölleke et al.'s (2021) view that 'only those who know how the media work are able to preserve their autonomy' (745). These findings highlight the vicious cycle of defensive mediatization, the significant impact it has on journalists' ability to do their jobs and on their profession's continued viability.

6.4 Limitations of this research

While this study remained committed to upholding rigorous standards in pursuit of its findings, there are limitations which must be acknowledged and discussed. These limitations concern the methodological approach taken in this study, the background of participants interviewed and the study's theoretical framework. It is also important at this juncture to reiterate that while a significant number of sports journalists and IOC officials were interviewed, their answers are not representative of all sports journalists or every IOC official. As noted by Bertrand and Hughes (2005), 'because every interview subject is unique, it is never intended to *prove* a hypothesis through interviews. But there is an intention to understand broader phenomena by exploring individual experiences' (142). While a significant number of in-depth interviews were conducted for this study, this sample size does not encompass all members of a profession such as sports journalism or employees of an organisation such as the IOC.

A notable limitation to reflect upon is the lack of gender diversity in the make-up of participants who were interviewed. A total of 50 participants were interviewed for this study, however only five were female, which represents 10% of the sample. A concerted effort was made to maintain gender balance, but a number of difficulties were encountered in doing so. The researcher reached out to both male and female sports journalists, IOC officials and Olympic experts to be interviewed, but the majority of those who agreed to participate were male. This reflects the present composition of sports desks in newsrooms (see Appendix E for statistical gender breakdown of journalists covering the 2024 Paris Olympics), which historically have been male-dominated (Theberge and Cronk 1986) and continue to be today. As noted by Price (2015): 'Sports desks have been dominated by men, with the sports pages largely written by men, about men playing sport' (9). This also highlights the historically male-dominated hierarchy within the IOC (Boykoff 2022) which female participants spoke about during interviews. A female sports broadcaster for CNN described the IOC as "misogynistic, sexist." Current statistics show that the majority of journalists covering sport are still men (Boczek et al. 2023). This study's difficulties recruiting female participants shows that this also applies in the context of the Olympics. Statistics which examine the number of women in leadership positions at sports organisations also show a disparity (Chambers et al. 2004, Hardin 2013; Schoch 2013; Whiteside 2013).

It is also necessary to reflect on the decision to interview journalists who have reported on the IOC throughout different decades. This choice was made to examine how the media's relationship with the IOC has evolved over time, dating from the 1970s to the present. As such, the lack of gender diversity at sports desks in previous decades was even greater. As noted by Salido-Fernández and Muñoz (2021) in their analysis into media coverage of female Olympians: 'Sports media [has been] a male-dominated space which affords priority to sports played by men and which are broadcast to a largely male audience' (33). Findings in this study show that the number of women covering the Olympics as sports journalists in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s was significantly lower than today. Therefore, the majority of older, veteran sports journalists who covered the IOC in previous decades interviewed for this study were men. This study's sample shows the current lack of gender diversity amongst sports journalists which is still prevalent today. A 2021 study calculated that just 14% of sports reporters identified as female (Dam 2022). This limitation highlights a male-focussed lens through which findings can be observed. Gender was not a leading focus of this study, rather the focus was on the institutional dynamics between the IOC and the media. However, the gender balance in participants raises important questions about the male-dominated lens through which the media creates our understanding of the Olympics. It also points to the historically male-dominated structures inherent in the IOC which shape its policies and governance.

6.5 Theoretical and practical implications

This study's findings help to strengthen our understanding of mediatization in which the media has acquired increasing levels of significance in social domains (Livingstone and Lunt 2014). By offering further evidence which differentiates offensive and defensive mediatization, it lends greater weight to enhancing the theory. Mediatization is a complex communications theory which has faced a number of criticisms (Ampuja et al. 2014). Critics argue that it is vague, overly ambitious and too wide-reaching (Deacon and Stanyer 2015; Ansaldo 2022). However, by applying the theory in new contexts and discovering more empirical evidence of its impact, mediatization scholars help to add more legitimacy for its continued use. This study's findings incorporate mediatization solely from an institutional perspective. However, using Nölleke et al.'s (2021) framework as a guide this study has uncovered further evidence displaying how the IOC

applies both offensive and defensive mediatization strategies in tandem. This illustrates that mediatization strategies do exist on a continuum between two extremes of encouraging media spotlight and constructing disincentives which minimise and reduce attention.

Much of the existing literature on mediatization has focussed too heavily on the ways in which organisations seek to attract attention and use the media for increased exposure and publicity. Nölleke et al. (2021) seek to flip this narrative by exploring how organisations apply tactics to inhibit and impede the media. Findings presented here help strengthen their study by offering more robust evidence across the macro, meso, and micro levels of the IOC. Not only does this study highlight the IOC implementing the three existing categories of *persistence*, *immunization* and *shielding*, but it also presents evidence of *steering*. This enhances the theory by adding a new category of defensive mediatization which is unique. Overall, this study deepens our understanding of mediatization by highlighting the ways in which the media and organisations shape one another in an ongoing process of adaptation (Hjarvard 2008a). This ongoing process benefits both the media and the organisation, which motivates their need to engage with one another further. Notably, however, this study reiterates Nölleke et al.'s (2021) view that mediatization encompasses both types of adaptation which are complementary and overlapping. This study validates this view, providing a high-profile example where a powerful organisation leans heavily on the application of defensive tactics. The IOC's conservative, defensive-minded approach to media relations has characterised its dealings with journalists in recent years. The IOC has changed what was once an open, agreeable, symbiotic relationship into a more intensely adversarial one which is now motivated by a growing sense of distrust and scepticism from both the IOC and journalists alike.

This study has a number of implications for practitioners and stakeholders. Sports journalists, those working for the IOC, officials working at other sports organisations, and professionals in positions such as communications officers and media managers can each learn from this study's results. For sports journalists this study has highlighted how many individuals feel about the present state of their profession. It has called attention to the current working conditions, demands and merits of covering the Olympics and the IOC. This study has highlighted the different motivations for why individuals choose to enter the sports journalism profession. Likewise, it draws attention to the

myriad of reasons why many are deciding to leave. Industry-wide issues in journalism today including a lack of secure job opportunities, lower pay, increased workload and less access (McEnnis 2016) are also applicable to those covering the Olympics. Findings from this study illustrate that many Olympic journalists are overworked and overburdened, which has led to an exodus of journalists covering the Olympics. As such, findings can offer new insights for practitioners going forward who seek to establish new innovative ways of producing Olympic journalism.

Added to this, findings show that the defensive mediatization strategies impacting sports journalists attempting to cover the Olympics has made the job less appealing than in previous decades. In the past, Olympic journalists benefited from higher levels of access, enjoyed more opportunities to travel in their work and availed of frequent one-on-one interview opportunities with Olympians and IOC officials. Today's Olympic journalists are much more restricted, reliant on Zoom press conferences, increased levels of remote reporting, and diminished access to sources. By highlighting this reality of reporting on the Olympics today, this study can inform decisions by media owners, editors, and newsroom bosses to improve the working conditions of sports journalists. For sports journalists themselves, the study also highlights in stark detail the ways in which sports organisations seek to impede them. Some sports journalists were cognizant of these tactics, while others seemed unaware of how they were being manipulated and blocked. These journalists struggled to recognise that these defensive tactics were an explicit strategy by organisations such as the IOC. By being made aware of defensive media strategies and deflection tactics, journalists can formulate their own practical strategies to combat them.

This study has a number of practical implications for officials working at sports organisations such as communications officers, media managers and press advisers. This study found that there is often a thorough misunderstanding and lack of knowledge about the work of journalists from those who work at sports organisations. Similarly, IOC officials shared their frustration at journalists' lack of knowledge about Olympic affairs and about the difficult choices and decisions which the IOC makes to stage the Olympics. This points to a breakdown in communication between the two parties. This study therefore offers new insights for journalists and communications officials to learn about one another. This mutual understanding can be useful for sports organisations in the

formulation of communication strategies. This raises further questions about the extent to which journalists and the subjects they cover can work together. This point echoes McEnnis' (2021) observation that many sports journalists today are too close to their sources to maintain independence and credibility. To what degree journalists and the IOC *should* work together while maintaining a professional distance is a question which future studies should consider. Findings from this study can also be useful for other sports bodies, such as FIFA, World Rugby, or the National Football League (NFL). Like the IOC, these organisations face challenges and opportunities in their dealings with journalists in an ever-evolving sports media landscape. This study outlined how press conferences, mixed zones, interview requests, off-the-record briefings and information leaks operate within the Olympic world. Communications officials can take these examples to help improve their own media relations. In the context of defensive mediatization and its usefulness, these findings can be used to aid sports organisations in dealing with crisis communication situations, conducting media training and responding to scandals.

6.6 Key takeaways for journalism and sports communication scholarship

This study offers a number of key takeaways for those scholars operating at the intersection of journalism and sports communication.

Defensive mediatization as a defining feature of contemporary sports journalism:

The evidence presented in this study of the numerous defensive mediatization strategies applied by the IOC suggests there has been a shift in the sport journalist-source relationship. While defensive mediatization is not the sole factor determining relations between sports journalists and their sources, it is not merely an anomaly and can be acknowledged as an increasingly dominant structural condition within global sports media ecosystems. This study provides evidence that today's highly sophisticated and image-conscious sports organisations build media relations not solely through mutually-beneficial collaboration (Sherwood et al. 2016), but through increasing levels of control, deterrence and strategic silence. These findings are useful for sports media scholars because it demonstrates the usefulness of defensive mediatization as a framework to map out this power balance shift between sports organisations, sources and journalists (Nölleke et al.

2017). Moreover, it provides explicit examples of the methods by which powerful, media-savvy entities implement deliberate institutional mechanisms to control narrative flow, limit dissent and protect organisational reputation. This evidence typifies a broader trend in which sports bodies deploy communication models which discourage independent scrutiny (Jennings 2011; Eisenhauer et al. 2014; Labiba and Ibrahim 2017; Rowe 2017; Manoli and Anagnostou 2022), widening the gap between sports journalists and their sources, while maintaining a facade of openness. Looking forward, scholars in the future can use this study and its use of defensive mediatization as a guide for examining how organisations, sceptical and weary of journalists, reassert control over their portrayal at a time when trust in journalism is weakening as a societal institution.

The Olympic journalist as a precarious and transitional figure:

The direct impact of the defensive strategies outlined in this study is clearly demonstrated by the increasingly precarious and transitional figure of the Olympic journalist. In the past, the Olympic journalist was a prized position of authority, value and acclaim for newspapers, magazines and television networks (Flindall and Wassong 2017). Being promoted to the rank of Olympic correspondent, or being assigned by a broadcaster to be its designated Olympic reporter, was the desire of countless sports journalists (Smith 2011; Kristiansen and Hanstad 2012; Steen 2012; Robertson 2024). While this is still the case for many aspiring and ambitious media professionals, this study uncovers some of the myths and misconceptions associated with being an Olympic journalist in today's fragmented media environment. The glamour and prestige of being a publication's Olympic correspondent is significantly less than in previous decades. This is due to regular job cuts at sports publications, a rise in freelance culture due to a lack of full-time contracts, lower pay and fewer long-term prospects and promotion opportunities for young Olympic media workers (Daum and Scherer 2018; Gentile et al. 2022; Rojas-Torrijos and Nölleke 2023). Publications see less value in assigning full-time roles towards covering the Games than in previous years and the idealised conception of the Olympic journalist has been slowly eroded with each passing edition. It has been substituted by rising levels of freelance Olympic media journalists who must work for numerous publications (Josephi and O'Donnell 2023) to cover the cost associated with traveling to cover the Olympic beat. On top of this, the rise of content creators and influencers into the space previously dominated by Olympic journalists has added to this erosion,

further blurring the boundaries between journalism and public relations content (McEnnis 2023). While the need for dedicated Olympic journalists is still significant due to the increasing complexities of covering this topic in an era of sportswashing, divisive transgender athlete debates, doping scandals and host-city controversies, this study clearly shows that the role has become more precarious and uncertain. This is an area for scholars to further probe to understand what the essential elements which comprise the professional identity of sports journalists will look like in the future.

The IOC as a case study in organisational soft power and strategic communication:

Looking outwards and forwards, scholars interested in the intersection of journalism and sports communication may also use this study as a timely example of how powerful organisations leverage soft power and strategic communications. Despite describing itself as apolitical and neutral (Boykoff 2022), this study outlines how the IOC's ambition to exist outside of politics is unrealistic. This extends to its engagement with journalists, with findings presented here clearly demonstrating the IOC's intentions to manage public opinion via its interactions with members of the media. Participants who work at the IOC acknowledged their awareness that members of the political elite and key Olympic stakeholders formulate their outlook of the IOC via their consumption of respected, legacy media publications. At a time when public trust in journalism as an institution is weakening (Moon et al. 2023), the IOC seeks to leverage these trends to render critical journalism increasingly irrelevant. The IOC seeks to bolster its image by dismissing the work of critical journalists, ignoring their coverage via lack of engagement and response, and by replacing their coverage with increased in-house media content, more press advisers, partnerships with content creators and alignment with celebrities to ensure its targeted messages reach audiences on their own terms (Fast 2024). This could be witnessed first-hand throughout the 2024 Paris Olympics. Popular celebrities such as American rapper Snoop Dogg and Saturday Night Live star Colin Jost were used by television networks as a substitute for traditional sports reporting, while Tom Cruise played a starring role in the Closing Ceremony. As noted by Weiss (2024): 'Celebrities have been central to Olympic programming strategy. [They are] a way to sidestep the conventions of sports reporting — the clinical critiques from technical experts, the "how does it feel" questions from sideline reporters — and channel the odd exuberance of fandom.' This study

demonstrates evidence of a communications model which mixes deterrence and seduction. The IOC restricts access for critical journalists while offering privileged relationships to those who align with the IOC's preferred narratives and agree to promote them. In this sense, the IOC operates both as a source and as a gatekeeper (Vos and Thomas 2019), dictating the terms of engagement for the global media who cover the Olympic Games. Future scholars can use this as a case study of how elite institutions manage their visibility in an increasingly crowded and saturated media environment, using strategic communication and celebrity endorsement as a form of soft power. This is not achieved through overt propaganda, coercion or censorship (Elsheikh et al. 2024), but rather through 'symbolic capital' (Stack 2010, 108), such as credibility and prestige, which the IOC has always prioritised and built its mythology around. Future research may use these findings to determine the impact of using strategic communication and excessively positive PR messaging as an instrument of soft power by examining its impact on democratic transparency, press freedom and institutional accountability in other corporate, political and cultural domains, for example tech companies. These findings will become even more necessary for scholars to address in light of prestigious international sporting competitions being held in authoritarian countries which have poor human rights records and limit press freedom. For example, Qatar bidding for the 2036 Olympic Games (Hopkins 2025) having recently hosted both the 2019 World Athletics Championships and 2022 FIFA World Cup. Engagement with journalists in the context of Qatar's use of migrant workers to build sporting infrastructure, its attitude towards gender equality, transgender athletes and same-sex relationships will reveal important insights about the IOC's use of media relations to influence public opinion when controversial topics arise in future host nations of the Olympics.

Journalism without intermediaries: reconfiguring the public sphere around the Olympics:

Finally, one of the most timely and significant takeaways from this study is its contribution towards the ongoing transformation of journalism's position in the media spectacle of the Olympic Games. In particular, this study has undercut the mythology of sports journalists as all-knowing intermediaries. Looking forward, Olympic journalists will continue to face a new reality that their elite position has diminished due to the influx of alternative content producers (Negreira-Rey et al. 2022). These multi-platform content creators and influencers provide enhanced, immediate

media coverage to younger audiences in increasingly multimedia ways, such as TikTok videos, podcasts and livestreams (Harry and Hammit 2024). Looking forward, traditional journalistic coverage of the Olympics must be flexible and open to change in order to meet the needs of younger audiences whose media consumption habits do not reflect that of previous generations of Olympic fans. An ongoing debate within Olympic discourse in recent years has been the relevance of the Olympic Games, particularly to younger audiences (Smith-Ditizio and Smith 2023). The introduction of new Olympic sports such as skateboarding, breakdancing, surfing, and the IOC's willingness to engage with E-Sports reflects efforts to address these concerns (Rogers 2024; Paul 2024; Renfree et al. 2024).

Similarly, this study has shown that journalists who cover the Olympics must acknowledge their own marginalization if they are to maintain a role as an intermediary of global mega-events in sport. Historically, journalists have played a significant role in how narratives around global sport are produced, legitimised and consumed (Jennings 2011). However, looking to the future, scholars and journalists alike must examine where journalists fit in a media environment where they have been pushed to the periphery and replaced by innovative new media producers. These new media producers are not compelled to maintain the same gatekeeping, accountability functions of public-service journalism (McEnnis 2023). Entertainment and engagement figures are markers of success in their content. Scholars of journalism and sports communication must examine this reconfiguration of the public sphere in terms of the Olympics, probing what the influx of new alternative media messengers means for traditional journalistic coverage. Content creators, brand ambassadors and social media influencers possess a significant grip on younger audience's attention spans, with the concept of citizen 'news influencers' gaining prominence on platforms such as TikTok in recent years (Kristensen and Jerslev 2025). Scholars may wish to examine what types of authority and legitimacy these new media producers now command in the public domain, particularly in view of a decreasing trust in journalists from younger audiences.

6.7 Future research

It is hoped that this study can act as a foundation for future studies in the areas of sports communication, Olympic research, and mediatization theory. This research has helped to address

research gaps in these areas, however more work needs to be done in the examination of Olympic journalists and the IOC as an organisation. Few studies until now have examined the motivations and opinions of Olympic sports journalists. More research which examines the realities of covering the Olympics (Flindall and Wassong 2017; Robertson 2024) is required in order to understand what future coverage of the Games will look like. Similarly, as the IOC continues to modernise in the context of decreasing interest in the Olympics (the 2022 Beijing Olympics drew the US's lowest-ever TV ratings[10], while the 2021 Summer Olympics saw a 38% decrease in viewership[11]), more studies into the impact of journalists' work in shaping the public's understanding of the Games is suggested. Studies which establish a framework for measuring the impact of sports journalists' work is also needed. Participants in this study spoke about their frustration at the lack of impact which in-depth reporting has on the IOC. Therefore, research which can offer evidence that links the work of sports journalists with an impact on the work of sports organisations would be highly beneficial. Due to cutbacks in newsrooms, sports journalists have less resources than before to pursue rigorous, in-depth reporting. By offering evidence that their work has impact, sports journalists can justify their efforts and point to evidence that merits allocating more resources towards in-depth reporting.

Similarly, studies which assess the impact of sports journalists' work on shaping the public's opinion of the Olympic Games and the IOC is suggested. As noted in the limitations of this study, further research which incorporates more female Olympic sports journalists which explores their experiences is necessary. The IOC is an organisation which regularly promotes its policy of gender equity on display at the Olympics between male and female athletes (Santana et al. 2022). As such, more research which gives voice to female sports journalists who cover the Games is needed. As noted by Boyle (2006): 'If the history of sports journalism has been little more than a footnote in academic studies of journalism, then the position of women in this area of journalism has merited barely a sentence' (147).

A specific finding from this study which requires further exploration is the emergence of content creators and online social media influencers. These new actors have replaced many functions

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[10] Source: NPR: Beijing Olympics drew the lowest U.S. ratings ever
[11] Source: SportsMediaWatch: Summer Olympics viewership remains low

performed by traditional sports journalists. This study shows that they co-opt journalistic spaces and thereby 'blur the distinction' (McEnnis 2023, 434) over what constitutes sports journalism and what is simply content masqueraded as public relations. Further research which gives in-depth focus to the use of online influencers by sports organisations merits attention. Finally, more research can be undertaken by using this study's evidence of defensive mediatization and its proposed fourth category of *steering*. Further studies can use these findings as a foundation to explore, critique and evaluate evidence of steering in other contexts outside the IOC. While it contains similarities to both shielding and immunization, steering is unique as it explicitly highlights an organisations' intention to guide journalists towards desirable ends. Further research which tests for evidence of steering at other organisations could offer further proof of its impact.

6.8 Conclusion

The final chapter of this dissertation has discussed the unique contribution of this study, its limitations, the practical and theoretical implications of its results and suggestions for future studies. This study tasked itself with seeking a deeper understanding of what it means to work as a sports journalist today. This study aimed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying causes of the challenges faced by these professionals by examining the role performed by Olympic sports journalists. A central assumption underpinning this study was that sports journalists face difficulties in their jobs due to the evolving relationship with the clubs, teams, and sports organisations which they report on. This assumption builds on Sherwood et al.'s (2016) observations about how a paradigm shift has weakened the position of sports journalists and empowered the entities they report on.

This study posited that we can better understand the current reality of what it means to report on the Olympics by rigorously and systematically examining journalists' relationship with the IOC. This is because the IOC is the organisation which stages the Games, therefore it can determine the conditions in which journalists operate. The IOC chooses which journalists are given media credentials, who they can interview, how long they can interview for and what topics are allowed to be discussed. By establishing parameters within official documents such as the Olympic Charter and its media guidelines, the IOC can ban journalists who they deem problematic, can ignore

requests for information and can issue libel and defamation letters to members of the media. This study, therefore, sought to understand how the IOC sets the terms and conditions which journalists operate in and similarly how the IOC's decisions are shaped by media coverage provided by those same journalists.

Using mediatization as its theoretical framework, this study demonstrated the different ways in which both parties accommodate one another. Mediatization was a highly suitable theory for this study because it offers a framework to illustrate how sports organisations and the media use each other in a symbiotic, mutually-beneficial way. What this study demonstrated, however, is that mediatization is not only 'a double-sided process of high modernity' (Hjarvard 2008a, 109) but is also a two-way process of accommodation and resistance. Much of the existing literature has focussed on the offensive or proactive ways that institutions seek media attention. This study provides empirical evidence that the IOC employs both offensive and defensive strategies in tandem, that these strategies often overlap and that they exist on a continuum. Using Nölleke et al.'s (2021) existing framework, my study provides extensive new empirical evidence across the macro, meso, and microlevels of the three categories of defensive mediatization: *persistence, shielding and immunization*.

The IOC employs a variety of different tactics to impede and inhibit the media. These include maintaining embargos, denying interview requests, issuing ready-to-use media packages for journalists to reproduce, banning journalists, hiring in-house journalists, using Zoom instead of in-person media events and issuing legal letters to reporters. Each of these defensive tactics are explicitly used in order to deter media attention. These strategies create an environment which stifles journalists in their work and discourages in-depth reporting. This study confirms Nölleke et al.'s (2021) suggestion that the reason why organisations employ defensive mediatization is to minimise potential reputational damage caused by journalists, to uphold a positive image of the organisation and to help them meet strategic objectives. Specifically, this study found that the IOC has treated journalists with increasing suspicion due to its traditional, insular structure, its scepticism of outsiders and a disdain for accountability. All of these factors are driven by a frustration from the IOC with what it perceives as overly critical, low-quality media coverage provided by journalists which misinforms the public about the IOC's role and activities.

This study offers further evidence of the precarious nature of sports journalism today. A number of Olympic journalists in this study have lost their jobs during their career in media, while others discussed the recent trend of journalists leaving the profession to work for sports organisations instead. These effects of defensive mediatization further strengthen the position of sports organisations such as the IOC because it succeeds in its objectives of self-protection and self-preservation. Admittedly, the IOC suffers when there are fewer Olympic sports journalists covering the Games, because smaller numbers of journalists generate less positive coverage. But simultaneously, the IOC benefits due to a reduction in critical coverage and a growing absence of sceptical reporters who perform watchdog journalism. Added to this, by hiring disaffected journalists who possess expertise about the Olympics and the journalism industry, the IOC can co-opt their skill sets. This study emphasises this *poacher-turned-gamekeeper* phenomenon. It shows how ex-journalists often "switch sides" and succeed in neutralising their former colleagues. Others have highlighted the act of sports journalists being hired by news competitors and rival media publications (Adler 2018). As noted by Buzzelli et al. (2020): 'This tactic, known in the industry as poaching, banks on luring away high-profile journalists with the promise of a higher salary, better benefits, and greater flexibility' (421). My study demonstrates that this trend also applies to sports organisations hiring disaffected journalists who seek a new opportunity. This shows that defensive mediatization is a vicious cycle where organisations apply tactics to reduce journalists' professional capacity, and can then take advantage of their precarious position. Now working for sports organisations as internal communications staff, ex-journalists can use their knowledge, insight and experience to continue this cycle by neutralising their former media colleagues.

This study shows how the IOC has leaned towards a more conservative approach to its media relations and the impact these tactics have on the ability of journalists to do their jobs today. Indeed, examples throughout the recent 2024 Paris Olympics have brought defensive mediatization into mainstream focus. The IOC received criticism for its issuing of media guidelines to journalists ahead of the 2024 Olympics which offered journalists guidance on what language and wording to use when describing transgender athletes. A headline in the UK's Daily Mail stated: "Olympics chiefs BAN a list of 'harmful' words describing trans athletes" (Morgan 2024). The IOC's Corporate Communications Manager defended the organisation's actions.

"Guidelines don't ban, but *guide*," he said (see Appendix J). This is a clear example of 'steering'. The IOC also made headlines by refusing accreditation requests for the prominent Olympics news website *InsideTheGames*[12]. These two examples, the issuing of media guidelines about the language surrounding transgender athletes, and the banning of journalists from a prominent Olympics publication, highlight the real-world prominence of defensive mediatization today. It bears the reality of this study's findings, offering evidence of mediatization at play, and highlights the impact and consequences of these strategies on journalists.

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[12] The IOC refused all media accreditation requests from *InsideTheGames* journalists for the 2024 Paris Olympics (See Appendix K) *InsideTheGames* is one of the leading Olympic-focused news websites which has provided extensive coverage of IOC affairs for close to two decades. Source: https://www.barrons.com/news/olympics-news-site-insidethegames-says-banned-from-paris-2024-1f057dfa

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Appendices

Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

Dublin City University, Informed Consent Form

Research Study Title:

Examining the relationship between the International Olympic Committee and sports journalists through the lens of defensive mediatization

University Department: DCU School of Communications

Principal Investigator: Aaron Gallagher (aaron.gallagher62@mail.dcu.ie)

Supervisor: Dr. Neil O'Boyle (Neil.oboyle@dcu.ie)

Purpose of the research

You are being asked to partake in a research study undertaken by Aaron Gallagher from Dublin City University as part of the PhD in Communications programme. This PhD research study will analyse the dynamics between sports organisations and the media. It will do so by conducting qualitative research via a series of semi-structured interviews with journalists and sports media professionals in order to explore the symbiotic, mutually beneficial working relationship between sport and the media.

Research Procedures

Should you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form once all your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. This study consists of interviews that will be conducted in person and online, asking questions about the current climate of sports communications, while discussing issues like access, the relationship between the media and athletes, and the production of digital content by sports organisations.

Research Outputs

The completed dissertation will be publicly available via the DCU library. It will also form the basis of scholarly publications.

Time required

Participants in this study will require approximately 30 minutes to one hour of your time, either in one interview or spread across two separate interviews if required. There may also be a follow-up discussion, either in person, on the

phone, or through email, clarifying all that was spoken in the duration of the interview in order to ensure complete accuracy.

Data Protection

No personal data belonging to participants will be gathered during this research.

Confirmation of particular requirements as highlighted in the Plain Language Statement

Participant – please complete the following (Circle Yes or No for each question)

I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me)	*Yes/No*
I understand the information provided	*Yes/No*
I understand the information provided in relation to data protection	*Yes/No*
I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study	*Yes/No*
I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions	*Yes/No*
I am aware that my interview will be audiotaped	*Yes/No*

Confirmation that involvement in the Research Study is voluntary

Participation in this research study is entirely voluntary and I, as a participant, may withdraw any point.

Confirmation of arrangements to be made to protect confidentiality of data, including that confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal limitations

I acknowledge that participation in this research is completely voluntary. I am aware that participants are free to decline to take part in the project. I can decline to answer any questions and am free to stop taking part in the project at any time. I am aware that study data will be handled as confidentially as possible and protected within the limitations of the law i.e. it is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting by some professions.

Confirmation of arrangements regarding the retention / disposal of data

All data relating to participants including name, role and organisation can be anonymized. To explain the process of anonymity further, all participants in this study will be given the choice to have their names and identity hidden if they wish. In cases like this, a pseudonym can be applied so that the participant's identity is concealed. If the results of the study are published or presented, individual names and other personally identifiable information can be anonymized. Details of participants will be retained for reference purposes in a password protected encrypted file, with access to the data restricted to those directly involved in the project. Also, it is important to note:

- if a participant withdraws from this study, their data will be destroyed, as is their right.
- participants who take part in this study will be able to access a copy of the transcript of their interview.

Signature:

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researchers, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project

Participant's Signature: _____

Name in Block Capitals: _____

Date: _____

DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY
Plain Language Statement

Introduction to the Research Study

Research Study Title:

Examining the relationship between the International Olympic Committee and sports journalists through the lens of defensive mediatization

Outline of Study:

This PhD research study will analyse the dynamics between sports organisations and the media. It will do so by conducting qualitative research via a series of semi-structured interviews with journalists and sports media professionals in order to explore their symbiotic, mutually beneficial working relationship between sport and the media.

University Department: DCU School of Communications

Principal Investigator: Aaron Gallagher (aaron.gallagher62@mail.dcu.ie)

Supervisor: Dr. Neil O'Boyle (Neil.oboyle@dcu.ie)

Statement as to whether or not the research data is to be destroyed after a minimum period

All digital files will be deleted from the researcher's laptop, Google Drive and external hard drive 24 months after publication. Data for this study, namely audio files of interviews, will be held for this period of time after publication as a means to double-check, if required, facts in the study itself. Essentially, audio files will be retained for 24 months after publication as a point of reference, before being deleted in all formats thereafter in October 2026.

Details of what participant involvement in the Research Study will require

Participants in this study will be required for a semi-structured interview with the investigator, which will last between approximately 30 minutes and one hour. This study will conduct interviews with journalists, athletes and sports professionals. It is possible that the researcher may request a brief follow-up interview, either in person, over the phone or through email, in order to clarify all the issues spoken during the interview, so as to retain clarity and accuracy. Participants will be asked questions about their professional careers working in the sport and media industries. They will be asked, as experts, their opinions on different issues in these sectors. Interviews will be recorded and saved in an audio format (eg: MP3, Wav file). Participants retain the right to decline a request for an interview and to decline to answer any questions they are not comfortable with during the interview itself. It is important to note that you, as a participant, are free to withdraw from this study <u>at any time.</u> If you withdraw from this study, all data and files relating to you will be deleted in all formats, as is your right. Should you agree to participate and give your consent to do so, interviews will be transcribed and analysed using software programmes like NVivo, which is used in research projects like this to organise large sets of information obtained during interviews and conversations.

Potential risks to participants from involvement in the Research Study (if greater than that encountered in everyday life)

It is not envisaged that there are any risks to participants arising from involvement in the study.

Any benefits (direct or indirect) to participants from involvement in the Research Study

There is no direct benefit to you from taking part in this study. It is hoped that this research will contribute to a greater and more nuanced understanding of sports communication studies, the understanding of the practice of sports journalism and the production of digital content by sports organisations.

Advice as to arrangements to be made to protect confidentiality of data, including that confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal limitations

Confidentiality of information can only be protected within the limitations of the law - i.e., it is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting by some professions". Depending on the research proposal and academic discipline, you may need to state additional specific limitations.

Statement that involvement in the Research Study is voluntary

Participation in research is completely voluntary. You are free to decline to take part in the project. You can decline to answer any questions and are free to stop taking part in the project at any time. Whether or not you choose to participate in the research and whether or not you choose to answer a question or continue participating in the project, there will be no penalty to you or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. As a participant, are free to withdraw from this study at any time. If you withdraw from this study, all data relating to you will be deleted in all formats.

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact:

The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000, e-mail rec@dcu.ie

You can contact the Principal Investigator of this research project here:

Aaron Gallagher, aaron.gallagher62@mail.dcu.ie

Appendix C: Media publications where participants worked

The Guardian	The Daily Telegraph	The Irish Times
The BBC	The Evening Standard	Reuters
The New York Times	NBC Sports	The Times UK
Sports Illustrated	USA Today	ESPN
The Athletic	CNN	InsideTheGames
The Washington Post	The Irish Independent	GamesBid.com
The Los Angeles Times	The Associated Press	3 Wires Sport
ARD Germany	Virgin Media	Around The Rings
RTÉ Sport	SportsJOE	

Appendix D: Interview Schedule

Date	Job title and employer	Duration of interview
3rd November 2022	Sports Journalist, The Times UK	37 minutes
15th November 2022	Sports Journalist, The Irish Times	1 hour 2 minutes
28th November 2022	Investigative Sports Journalist, ARD Germany	36 minutes
1st December 2022	Sports Journalist, Deutsche Welle	31 minutes
12th December 2022	Sportswriter, The Athletic	47 minutes
18th December 2022	Sports Broadcaster, Virgin Media	1 hour 3 minutes
5th January 2023	TV Commentator, RTÉ Sport	54 minutes
10th January 2023	Olympic Sportswriter, The BBC	41 minutes
17th January 2023	Online Sportswriter, RTÉ Sport	1 hour 14 minutes
24th January 2023	Online Sports Editor, RTÉ Sport	56 minutes
28th February 2023	Freelance Olympic Sportswriter, Irish Independent / Irish Examiner	52 minutes
7th March 2023	Former Marketing Director, IOC	48 minutes
15th March 2023	Media Manager, European Olympic Committee	31 minutes
21st March 2023	Media Manager, IOC	29 minutes
23rd March 2023	Olympic Sports Journalist, The Daily Telegraph	35 minutes
28th March 2023	Olympic Correspondent, The Associated Press	28 minutes
4th April 2023	Media Officer, IOC	1 hour 6 minutes
6th April 2023	Olympic Correspondent & Broadcaster, The BBC	44 minutes
18th April 2023	Media Director, IOC	58 minutes
20th April 2023	Olympic Journalist, The Guardian	41 minutes
26th April 2023	Olympic Journalist, The Evening Standard	26 minutes
2nd May 2023	Senior Communications Official, IOC	44 minutes
4th May 2023	Olympic Journalist, InsideTheGames	54 minutes
16th May 2023	Former Press Officer, IOC	49 minutes
22nd May 2023	Olympic Journalist, GamesBids.com	36 minutes
30th May 2023	Internal Communications Staff Member, IOC	40 minutes
1st June 2023	Olympic Journalist, AroundTheRings	33 minutes
6th June 2023	Columnist & TV Contributor, USA Today / CNN	31 minutes

14th June 2023	Freelance Sportswriter, Los Angeles Times	29 minutes
15th June 2023	Olympic Journalist, InsideTheGames	1 hour 2 minutes
21st June 2023	Olympic Correspondent, New York Times	47 minutes
27th June 2023	Marketing Director, IOC	58 minutes
28th June 2023	Sports Journalist, ESPN	45 minutes
29th June 2023	Sports Broadcaster, NBC	37 minutes
6th July 2023	Former Press Officer, IOC	33 minutes
10th July 2023	Sports Reporter, The Washington Post	43 minutes
18th July 2023	Media Manager, National Olympic Committee	30 minutes
25th July 2023	Media Monitoring Staff Member, IOC	41 minutes
3rd August 2023	Olympic Author	52 minutes
10th August 2023	Public Relations Executive, IOC	1 hour 8 minutes
22nd August 2023	Media and Communications Consultant, IOC	41 minutes
24th August 2023	Social Media Manager, IOC	34 minutes
5th September 2023	Former Olympian	57 minutes
19th September 2023	Media Manager, British Olympic Committee	36 minutes
21st September 2023	Former Olympian	31 minutes
28th September 2023	Media and Communications Consultant, IOC	45 minutes
3rd October 2023	Director of Communications, British Olympic Committee	38 minutes
5th October 2023	Olympic author	49 minutes
10th October 2023	Social Media Manager, IOC	33 minutes
12th October 2023	Media Manager, European Olympic Committee	36 minutes

Appendix E: Media statistics provided by the IOC

The total number of accredited media at the 2024 Paris Olympics was 24,171:

Of these 24,171 accreditations, 5,733 were granted to written and photographic press, representing 2,113 accredited press organisations from 146 National Olympic Committees (NOCs). The remaining accreditations were allocated to 18,438 representatives from both the Media Rights-Holders (MRHs) and Olympic Broadcasting Services (OBS), the host broadcaster of the Games.

Category press	Total
E (journalist)	2,687
Es (sport specific journalist)	336
EP (photographer)	1,264
EPs (sport specific photographer)	277
ET (technician)	148
Ec (MPC support staff)	45
ENR (non-rights holding broadcaster)	460
Ex (local journalist)	58
EPx (local photographer)	37
NOC E (press attaché)	316
Ex NOC Es (press attaché sport specific)	105
Total Press	5,733

Gender breakdown of accredited media at the 2024 Paris Olympics:

Category press	Female	Male	Total	Female %	Male %
E	612	2,075	2,687	23	77
Es	90	246	336	27	73
EP	184	1,080	1,264	15	85
EPs	59	218	277	21	79
ET	25	123	148	17	83
Ec	11	34	45	24	76
ENR	133	327	460	29	71
Ex	14	44	58	24	76
EPx	6	31	37	16	84
NOC E	123	194	316	39	61
Ex NOC Es	46	58	105	45	55
Total Press	1,303	4,430	5,733	23	77

International Olympic Committee

FACTSHEET

IOC Sessions

22 August 2024

The mission

The IOC Session is the general meeting of the members of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). It is the supreme organ of the IOC. The IOC Session adopts, modifies and interprets the Olympic Charter and its decisions are final. While the IOC Session may delegate powers to the IOC Executive Board (EB), all important decisions are taken by the IOC Session, which votes on proposals put forward by the EB. If the IOC EB can be considered the "government" of the IOC, the IOC Session is the "parliament".

The IOC Session is held at least once a year, often over a two- or three-day period. In the years when Olympic Games take place, the IOC Session traditionally precedes them. An extraordinary IOC Session can be convened upon the initiative of the IOC President, or on the written request of at least one third of the IOC Members.

The main prerogatives of the IOC Session are the following:
- It elects the host of the Olympic Games;
- It elects the IOC President, Vice-Presidents, the other members of the IOC EB and – on the latter's proposal – IOC Members;
- It decides or amends the Olympic Charter;
- It decides on the inclusion or exclusion of a sport on the programme of the Olympic Games;
- It decides on the recognition (or exclusion) of International Sports Federations (IFs), National Olympic Committees (NOCs) or any other sports organisation which submits a request;
- It decides on the cities which will host forthcoming IOC Sessions (the IOC President decides on the location of Extraordinary IOC Sessions);
- It approves the reports and accounts of the IOC.

Procedures

The following main procedures are applicable for the decisions taken by the IOC Session:
- The IOC President, or, in his absence, the longest-serving IOC Vice-President present chairs the IOC Session;
- The quorum required for an IOC Session is half the total membership of the IOC with voting rights;
- Each member has a vote, and voting by proxy is not allowed. Abstentions and spoiled or blank votes are not counted;
- In general, an IOC Member must abstain from participating in a vote when it concerns a city (Olympic Games, IOC Session, Olympic Congress), a person (IOC Member) or any other matter from his or her country / NOC;
- The decisions are taken by the majority of votes cast. However, a majority of two-thirds of the members present at the IOC Session is required for any modification to the Fundamental Principles and Rules of the Olympic Charter;
- The election of a host must take place in a country not having a candidate for the Olympic Games in question;
- A host is declared elected when it obtains the majority of the votes cast. If there is no majority, the host with the fewest votes is eliminated, and IOC Members proceed to another round of voting. The procedure is repeated until an absolute majority is obtained;
- The IOC President, the IOC Vice-Presidents and the IOC EB Members are elected by the IOC Session, in a secret ballot, by the majority of the votes cast. If there is no majority, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated, and the IOC Members proceed to another round of voting. Abstentions are not taken into account, nor are spoiled or blank votes. The procedure is repeated until an absolute majority is obtained.

Appendix G: IOC Members

FACTSHEET

IOC Members

17 October 2023

Roles and responsibilities

The IOC is currently composed of 107 members, including IOC President Thomas Bach, each being elected by the IOC Session by the majority of the votes cast.

The IOC Members

The IOC Members, natural persons, are representatives of the IOC in their respective countries, and not their country's delegate within the IOC. As stated in the Olympic Charter: *"Members of the IOC represent and promote the interests of the IOC and of the Olympic Movement in their countries and in the organisations of the Olympic Movement in which they serve."* (Olympic Charter, Chapter 2, Rule 16, §1.4).

The IOC Members meet at the general assembly, or Session, which is the organisation's supreme organ, and whose decisions are final. The IOC Members are elected for a period of eight years, and their mandate can be renewed.

The age limit fixed is 70 years old, except for members co-opted between 1966 and 1999, for whom the age limit is 80. The IOC Session may, on the proposal of the IOC Executive Board (EB), extend the age limit for any IOC Member for a period a four-year maximum.

The members meet every year at the IOC Session in order to take decisions concerning the institution and the Olympic Games, such as the election of the hosts of the Games, changes to the Olympic Charter, election of the IOC President, Vice-Presidents, and members of the IOC EB, as well as the cooptation of new members.

The IOC President

The IOC President is elected by the members of the organisation by a secret ballot. Only one IOC Member can be elected to the presidency. Their mandate is of eight years, renewable once for four years. The IOC President is the IOC's permanent representative and presides over all its activities. Since 10 September 2013, the IOC President is Thomas Bach (Germany).

Table A: IOC Presidents

Demetrius Vikelas (GRE)	1894 – 1896
Pierre de Coubertin (FRA)	1896 – 1925
Henri de Baillet-Latour (BEL)	1925 – 1942
J. Sigfrid Edström (SWE)	1946 – 1952
Avery Brundage (USA)	1952 – 1972
Lord Killanin (IRL)	1972 – 1980
Juan Antonio Samaranch (ESP)	1980 – 2001
Jacques Rogge (BEL)	2001 – 2013
Thomas Bach (GER)	2013 – 2025

The IOC Vice-Presidents and IOC Executive Board (EB) Members

All ten members of the IOC EB Members (including the four Vice-Presidents) are elected by the IOC Session in a secret ballot by a majority of the votes cast. The duration of the terms of office of the Vice-Presidents and of the ten other members of the IOC EB is four years. A member may serve for a maximum of two successive terms; he may be elected again as member of the IOC EB after a minimum period of two years. The four IOC Vice-Presidents are:

- Ser Miang NG (SGP);
- John D. Coates, AC (AUS);
- Nicole Hoevertsz (ARU);
- Juan Antonio Samaranch (ESP).

The IOC EB manages the affairs of the IOC. It:

- conducts the procedure for acceptance and selection of candidatures for the organisation of the Olympic Games;

Appendix H: The Olympic Movement

FACTSHEET

The Olympic Movement

20 June 2024

Origin

The brainchild of Frenchman Pierre de Coubertin, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Olympic Movement were officially established on 23 June 1894 at the Paris International Congress that was organised by Coubertin at the Sorbonne.

Coubertin's vision for the Olympic Games may be summarised as follows: "*Why did I restore the Olympic Games? To ennoble and strengthen sports, to ensure their independence and duration, and thus to enable them better to fulfil the educational role incumbent upon them in the modern world.*". Coubertin is also the author of the famous phrase which characterises the Olympic Games: "*The important thing in life is not the triumph, but the fight; the essential thing is not to have won, but to have fought well.*" (Pierre de Coubertin, London, 1908).

The hosts for both the first and second editions of the modern Olympic Games were quickly agreed upon during this Congress: Athens for 1896 and Paris for 1900.

The Olympic Movement

The goal of the Olympic Movement is clearly defined in the Olympic Charter: "*The goal of the Olympic Movement is to contribute to building a peaceful and better world by educating youth through sport practised in accordance with Olympism and its values.*" (Olympic Charter, Chapter 1, Rule 1.1.).

The Olympic Movement is the concerted, organised, universal and permanent action, carried out under the supreme authority of the IOC, of all individuals and entities who are inspired by the values of Olympism. It covers the five continents. It reaches its peak with the bringing together of the world's athletes at the great sports festival, the Olympic Games. "*Belonging

to the Olympic Movement requires compliance with the Olympic Charter and recognition by the IOC.*" (Olympic Charter, Fundamental Principles of Olympism, § 7).

In addition to the IOC, the Olympic Movement therefore includes the International Sports Federations (IFs), the National Olympic Committees (NOCs), the Organising Committees for the Olympic Games (OCOGs), all other recognised federations, institutions and organisations, as well athletes, judges/referees, coaches and other sports technicians.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC)

The IOC is the supreme authority of the Olympic Movement. It acts as a catalyst for collaboration between all parties of the Olympic family, including the NOCs, the IFs, the athletes, the OCOGs, The Olympic Partner (TOP) programme sponsors and broadcast partners. It also fosters cooperation with public and private authorities, in particular the United Nations (UN), national governments and supranational organisations.

From a legal standpoint, the IOC is an international non-governmental non-profit organisation, of unlimited duration, in the form of an association with the status of a legal person, recognised by the Swiss Federal Council (decision of 17 September 1981). Its official languages are French and English. The administrative headquarters of the IOC were originally based in Paris, but, since 10 April 1915, they have been based in Lausanne, Switzerland.

Although it has no legal obligation to do so and following a recommendation of the Olympic Agenda 2020, the IOC has voluntarily decided to comply with International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS).

Appendix I: Additional themes — hyper-nationalism at the Olympics, disillusionment with the Olympic ideal and Games-time paralysis

Thematic analysis was conducted in this study using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) reflexive approach which conceptualises themes as interpretive patterns of meaning developed by the researcher through a process of active engagement with source material. In this context, I define a theme as a patterned response within the data set which captures a key concept in relation to the research question. As Braun and Clarke (2006) argue, themes do not merely 'reside in the data' (80), but are generated through the active role played by the researcher. The theoretical positions and values of the researcher play a decisive role in what themes are generated. Frequency of a particular discussion point in the data does not constitute its value as a theme in this study. Value in a theme is weighted on the meaningfulness and relevance to the research question: 'the specific research question can evolve through the coding process, which maps onto the inductive approach' (Braun and Clark 2006, 84). In this study, theme development was non-linear, interpretive and involved a process of back and forth refinement between the codes generated. This process meant the careful and deliberate discarding of themes which were no-longer relevant and useful. Examples of themes which were identified in the first phase of interviews, but were not explored in further depth include: hyper-nationalism in reporting, disillusionment with the Olympic ideal, and Games-time paralysis. Below I explore examples of these weaker themes which were initially identified in this process of thematic analysis, but were discarded or integrated due to their inability to directly aid the study's objectives in answering its research questions.

Discussions surrounding **hyper-nationalism at the Olympics** arose in a consistent number of interviews. This theme refers to a core aspect of the Olympic spectacle in which national identity, patriotism and competition between nations are all central tenets (Boykoff 2022; Choi 2023). During discussions, this theme focussed particularly on the role played by journalists and broadcasters in perpetuating these ideas (Bruce 2014). A number of participants spoke about the difficulty they faced in maintaining objectivity in their reporting, while also feeling an obligation to support athletes from their home nation. Sports journalists from a range of different countries reflected upon this conflict, which pitted their journalistic integrity and impartiality against a desire from audiences to hype and emphasise the achievements of their home nation's Olympians

(Kristiansen and Hanstad 2012). Participants said they understood a need to share the excitement of fans and that one role of a sports broadcaster is to reflect the mood of their nation during the Olympics. However, participants admitted to feeling uncomfortable with this expectation because it ran opposed to the values of neutrality which are paramount to unbiased reporting. This theme was highly interesting in the context of how Olympic journalists reflect upon being viewed as a potential apparatus of nationalism, however its direct link to this study's research questions was viewed as weak.

A second theme which was ultimately discarded through the process of thematic analysis was **disillusionment with the Olympic ideal**. This theme refers to feelings of disappointment, anger and despondency among journalists and IOC officials alike with the concept of Olympism. The foundational idea of the Olympic Games is built upon a storied philosophy established by the IOC's founder Pierre de Coubertin. It is a vision which blends sport with culture, education and international co-operation (Lang 2022). Peace, fair play, responsibility, internationalism, and sustainability are each core facets of Olympism (Fernandes 2024). Participants in this study spoke about feelings of disillusionment with the Olympic ideal due to repeated corruption scandals associated with senior leadership figures within the Olympic Movement (Amegashie 2006; Hunt and Hoberman 2011; Blair 2018). Some veteran Olympic journalists said the enthusiasm and joy which they once associated with the Games had been replaced with jaded cynicism, annoyance and disgust. This theme was present in many conversations in this study. However, its usefulness was to be found in how it shaped my understanding of how Olympic journalists can be manipulated and used by leveraging their attitudes towards the Games. This theme did not directly link to the research questions at hand, therefore it was not explored in significant depth. It remained a useful insight into the outlook of Olympic journalists and IOC officials on the wider philosophy and vision upon which the IOC organises the Games. Similarly, it guided future interviews in terms of how an individual's enthusiasm and belief in the Olympic ideal may be used by the IOC to encourage positive reporting about its activities and governance. Likewise, negative and disillusioned feelings towards the IOC from journalists could be used as motivation for investigative reporting which further exposes the negative aspects of the Olympic ideal (Jennings 2011).

A third theme which was identified early in this study, but was omitted through the process of thematic analysis, was **Games-time paralysis**. This theme refers to the particular behaviour of journalists during major sporting events when topics such as corruption allegations, drugs, doping scandals and the excessive costs of hosting the Olympics, fade into the background. This is a phenomenon which has been identified in recent years by sports media scholars whereby non-sporting topics of importance are relegated to the background once the actual sporting events commence (Steen 2012; Liang 2019; Robertson 2024). In its place, Coakley (2015) explains that elements of the Great Sport Myth begin to take over media coverage. This refers to a 'pervasive and nearly unshakable belief in the inherent purity and goodness of sport' (403). Olympic Games typically follow a pattern of media coverage which is dominated by important and weighty non-sporting narratives in the build-up (Couldry et al. 2010). However, once sporting activities commence, many journalists shift their focus towards reporting which primarily focuses on famous victories, gold medals and new world records (Robertson 2018). Steen (2012) has noted that the frenzied and excitable nature of stadium atmospheres often result in sports journalists losing focus on what stories really matter: '[it] may lead to the suspension, or outright surrender, of one's critical faculties' (215). This Games-time paralysis was noted by a number of participants in this study, who spoke about the repeated failure of the media to maintain consistency in their coverage. The media's failure to maintain interest in non-sporting stories after the Games has concluded, such as the financial impact and negative infrastructural legacy of hosting for a city and its inhabitants, was also noted.

While coverage is filled with this type of non-sporting, in-depth investigative reporting prior to the Games getting underway, this effort to give a 'voice to the voiceless' (Freeman et al. 2011, 590) is regularly forgotten and paralysed due to the excitement and attention which sporting events deliver at the Games. Participants said their frustration primarily lay in the regularity and predictability of this Games-time paralysis following the 'media event build-up phase' (Robertson 2018, 3,207) and how the media falls into the same trap during each new edition of the Games. Other participants said this phenomenon was to be expected, not only because audiences care more about sporting events than the unglamorous elements of how the Games is staged, but because the Olympics is ultimately a sporting event and coverage should focus on the exploits of the athletes. These participants felt that coverage should focus on the achievements of Olympians, who have

earned the spotlight through years of training and hard work, instead of dwelling on the negative behaviour of officials and politicians. This theme was highly interesting and sheds light on the behaviour and mentality of Olympic journalists during the Games. However, its direct link to the study's objective to explore the relationship between Olympic journalists and the IOC was tangential. This theme focused attention on the day-to-day conduct of Olympic journalists which, although partially relevant, diverts attention away from the structural dynamics between the IOC and journalists which this study was tasked with investigating. This theme demonstrates the strength of reflexive thematic analysis whereby supposedly weaker themes can be 'combined, refined and separated, or discarded' (Braun and Clark 2006, 90). As such, the concept of Games-time paralysis maintained a level of relevance in this study by being incorporated into discussions of how the IOC actively takes advantage of this paralysis phenomenon through its direct implementation of defensive mediatization strategies.

Appendix J: News articles about IOC's 2024 media guidelines

Daily Mail news article from 7th June 2024 about IOC media guidelines:
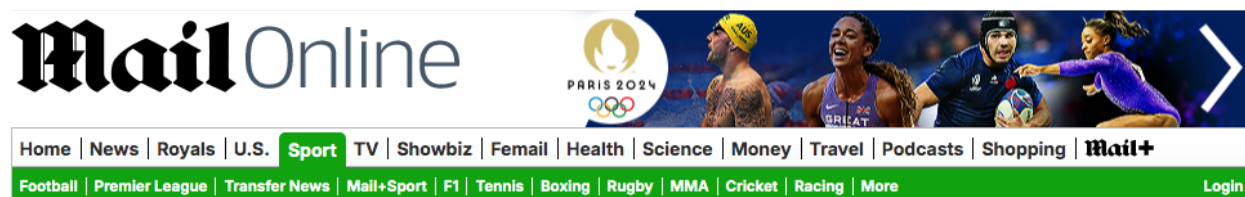
Olympics chiefs BAN a list of 'harmful' words describing trans athletes - and tell journalists not to call them 'born male', 'biologically male' or mention a 'sex change' during the Games in Paris

- The rules are in a new 33-page document published ahead of Paris 2024

By LIAM MORGAN
PUBLISHED: 14:28, 7 June 2024 | UPDATED: 16:16, 7 June 2024

The organisation in charge of running the Olympic Games has sparked outrage after telling journalists not to use a list of 'harmful' words when referring to **transgender** athletes competing at Paris 2024 this summer.

In a new 33-page document, the International Olympic Committee warned the media against using terms such as 'born male', 'born female', 'biologically male' and 'biologically female', which they claim is 'problematic language'.

The IOC also urges the press to avoid 'sex change', 'post-operative surgery' and 'transsexual'. They said these phrases 'can be dehumanising and inaccurate' when describing transgender sportspeople and athletes with sex variations.

Tweet by IOC Corporate Communications and Public Affairs Director on 7th June 2024 responding to Daily Mail article about IOC media guidelines:

Christian Klaue ✔
@ChKlaue
...

Guidelines don't ban, but guide.

The Olympic Games are the only event that brings the entire world together in these difficult times. The Olympics are about athletes from all corners of the world, from many different backgrounds and different beliefs, competing in peaceful competition. In this divided world, it is something precious we should all cherish.

The Olympic Charter is clear: "The practice of sport is a human right. Every individual must have access to the practice of sport, without discrimination of any kind in respect of internationally recognised human rights within the remit of the Olympic Movement. The Olympic spirit requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play."

This applies to all athletes across genders, including the engagement with and the portrayal of transgender and non-binary participants in sports and athletes with sex variations.

It is for this reason, that the topic has been added to the Gender Portrayal Guidelines, which were first issued in 2018 and have been updated in 2021, and now in 2024.

As the subtitle of the document says, the guidelines are aiming at "gender-equal, fair and inclusive representation in sport".

👉 Read yourself in the guidelines: olympics.com/ioc/news/ioc-p...

Daily Mail Online ✔ @MailOnline · Jun 7
Olympics chiefs BAN a list of 'harmful' words describing trans athletes - and tell journalists not to call them 'born male', 'biologically male' or mention a 'sex change' during the Games in Paris trib.al/AIGAHWB

Appendix K: News articles about IOC banning journalists for Paris 2024

Olympics News Site Insidethegames Says 'Banned' From Paris 2024

By AFP - Agence France Presse   June 18, 2024

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Print Article

Text size

Olympics news website Insidethegames.biz, which was acquired by a Russian-run fund, says it has been effectively "banned" from the Paris Olympics after its accreditation requests were turned down.

The sports website, previously based in England and run by British sports journalist Duncan Mackay for 18 years until last October, was considered an influential source of news on the Olympic movement.

It was sold last October to new owners, Vox Europe Investment Holding, an investment fund with addresses in Britain and Hungary whose ultimate owners remain unknown.

"We feel like we are banned by the IOC (the International Olympic Committee)," chief operating officer for the site, Oleg Denisov, told AFP by telephone on Monday.

IOC confirms Russian journalists' veto

By Inside The Games   🕐 Monday, 29 July 2024

Reporters from the sanctioned country currently at war with Ukraine were stripped of their Paris 2024 credential, the Games organisers confirmed on Monday after the TASS state news agency first reported the withdrawal.

The opening ceremony on Friday was met with some blowback from a few religious groups and even countries like Russia, who have ramped up an already strained relationship with the International Olympic Committee. Even before the Games, complaints from the Russian Foreign Ministry addressed the fact that local journalists who had applied for accreditation did not get it.

TASS said on Sunday that the removal of the reporters and photographers' accreditation, essential to cover the Games, was "completely unexpected" after the journalists had entered France, received passes and attended the opening and several events.

"I can confirm that some accredited journalists have received an a posteriori decision from the competent authorities to withdraw their accreditation," 2024 Paris Olympics spokeswoman Anne Descamps told reporters. "As the Paris-2024 Organising Committee, we are applying the decision without being involved in the rationale behind this information, which has not been communicated to us," she added.

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Appendix L: Photographs of Olympic broadcaster Edmond Dehorter

Edmond Dehorter (pictured below) made history by becoming the first broadcaster to commentate live on the Olympics at the Paris Games in 1924. However, he initially faced challenges due to envious newspaper journalists who ordered a ban on him entering venues. (Photo Credit: legacygroupe.com)
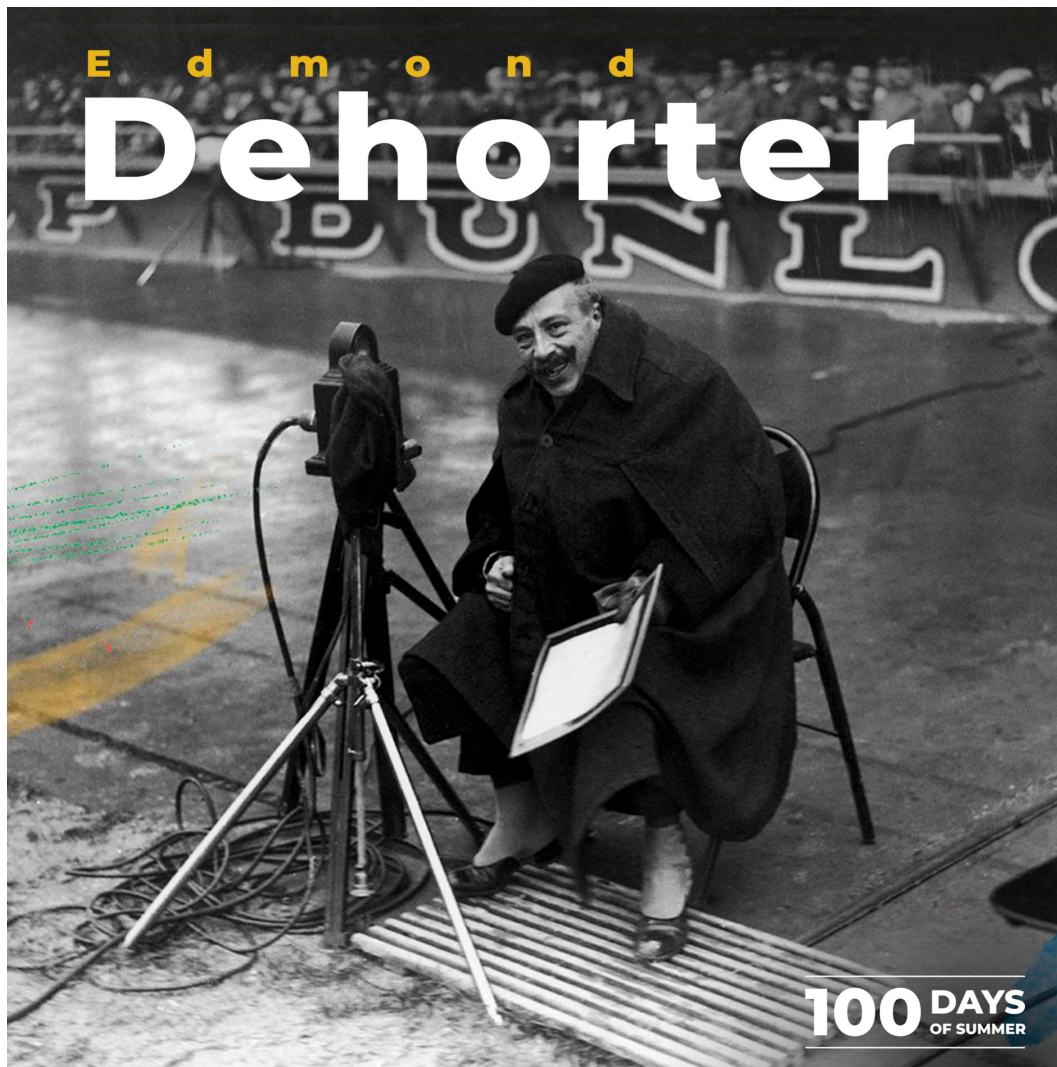
Nicknamed 'The Unknown Speaker' and 'The Father of Sports Commentary', Dehorter used a hot-air balloon to defy a banning order on entering Olympic venues during the 1924 Paris Games. He placed a microphone inside the hot-air balloon and flew over venues to commentate on events below. (Photo Credit: The Olympic Museum)