



Article

# There He Goes: The Influencer–Sports Journalism of Fabrizio Romano on Twitter and Its Implications for Professionalism

Simon McEnnis

School of Art and Media, University of Brighton, Brighton BN2 0JY, UK; s.mcennis@brighton.ac.uk

**Abstract:** Fabrizio Romano’s sizeable social media followings and role as influencer–sports journalist warrant attention. Romano, known for his catchphrase ‘Here We Go’, specialises in football transfers and produces multi-platform content. This study investigates how Romano’s Twitter practice informs professional understandings of sports journalism. A content and textual analysis (n = 494) was conducted of one month of Romano’s tweets and replies. Tweets were categorised according to markers of sports journalism practice. Results show Romano is professionalising sports journalism on social media and subverting understandings of personal branding through favouring objective news over subjective opinion and focusing on the professional rather than the personal. Romano’s transfer news prioritises major European football clubs, which is consistent with the trajectory of sports journalism on digital platforms. Play-by-play commentary is a minor aspect of Romano’s Twitter output, which contributes to the debate on the significance of game coverage to contemporary sports journalism. Tweets did not mention the human rights issues surrounding the World Cup starting in Qatar, even though this was a key talking point. This finding suggests 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, particularly where ultra-specialist settings are concerned.

**Keywords:** sports journalism; social media; digital journalism; influencer; Fabrizio Romano; professionalism; Twitter; personal branding



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## 1. Introduction

*“I can imagine my life without water and food, I can’t imagine my life without Twitter”—  
Fabrizio Romano on Twitter, 18/11/22*

Social media have enabled sports journalists to increase their profile and visibility while attracting large followings that are, in some instances, exceeding the readerships of the news organisations they work for. The Italian football journalist Fabrizio Romano stands out from a crowded landscape with particularly sizeable social media followings. Romano, whose catchphrase ‘Here We Go’ is used to confirm transactions, has followings of 13.6 million on Twitter, 11 million on Instagram, 8.2 million on Facebook, 1.3 million YouTube and 524,000 on Twitch at the time of writing. He works or has worked for a range of media organisations including Sky Sport Italia, The Guardian, and CBS Sports.

This article explores Romano’s Twitter practice to provide a vital insight into how an influencer–sports journalist approaches professionalism. The sociology of professions has emerged as an important conceptual framework in understanding journalism change in the digital age (Aldridge and Evetts 2003; Waisbord 2013; Carlson and Lewis 2015). Professionalism is a central concern to sports journalism (Salwen and Garrison 1998) that stems from its lowly reputation within wider newsroom culture as the toy department (Oates and Pauly 2007; Rowe 2007). The migration of analogue to digital platforms has been a source of anxiety for sports journalists, who have had to both protect and adjust their practices in new media environments while attempting to elevate them to disprove the toy department claim (McEnnis 2020). Sports journalism has become a ‘leaking craft’ with its practices and practitioners becoming increasingly porous and diffuse in a complex

sports media landscape (Hutchins and Rowe 2012). Scholars therefore face a challenge in mapping the composite approaches and practices that formulate the professional field of sports journalism in the digital age.

This paper focuses on the emergent practice of influencer–sports journalism, using Romano as a case study. Sports journalism research design tends to focus on groupings in samples, either among the occupational community through interviews/surveys or of news content across a range of organisations via a media analysis. This study takes an individualised, case-study approach to reflect an increasingly atomised profession whereby social media have allowed sports journalists to detach from the organisations they work for and, in instances, become a news brand (McEnnis 2021). A comprehensive understanding of sports journalism professionalism in the digital age can only be understood through considering the individual as well as the collective. It is against this backdrop that Fabrizio Romano enters the fray. This study used a content and textual analysis of Romano’s tweets and replies to consider the approach to Twitter practice of an influencer–sports journalist.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. *Who Is Fabrizio Romano?*

Romano has been described within the industry as a ‘transfer window superstar reporter’ (Jones 2020) and football’s ‘prophet of the deal’ (Smith 2022). Sports journalists consider themselves as generalists and believe they do not have time to concentrate on one niche topic, unlike bloggers (McEnnis 2016). However, Romano’s sports journalism focuses on a specialism (transfer stories) within a specialism (football journalism) within a specialism (sports journalism) in journalism.

Romano was born in Naples in 1993 and is a freelance Italian journalist who has worked for various media companies such as Sky Sport Italia and The Guardian in the UK. Romano started writing stories and sending them to websites for free (Smith 2022). Romano was then contacted by an aspiring football agent working at La Masia, Barcelona FC’s youth academy, who wanted him to write an article on players Gerard Deulofeu and Mauro Icardi (Sprung 2021; Smith 2022).

Following this initial contact, the journalist–source relationship developed between Romano and player agent, particularly on Facebook messenger (Sprung 2021). Romano broke the story that Icardi was joining Sampdoria from Barcelona in 2011 and then, more notably because by then Icardi was an established player, he moved on to Inter Milan in 2014 with Romano breaking the news on a fan site (Sprung 2021; Smith 2022). This scoop effectively launched his journalism career as he took a job at Sky Sport Italia. Romano came to international attention in 2020 when he confirmed that Bruno Fernandes, the Portuguese midfielder, had signed for Manchester United. To confirm the deal had been concluded, Romano used the statement ‘Here We Go’ that has since become his iconic catchphrase (Jones 2020; Sprung 2021; Smith 2022). Romano’s announcement provided finality in a genre of transfer stories where fact and fiction are often difficult to separate amid a swirl of rumour (Smith 2017; Rojas-Torrijos and Mello 2021).

Romano has since become a major cross-platform presence whereby ‘when Romano is not submitting transfer stories to The Guardian or Sky Sport, he is uploading them to Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and YouTube, or he is talking about them on his podcast or his Twitch channel or in his latest role . . . with CBS Sports’ (Smith 2022).

### 2.2. *Sports Journalism and Professional Change in the Digital Age*

Journalism is an anomalous profession because it lacks the features of occupational closure such as licensing and clear entry routes that are present in more established and recognised professions such as medicine and law. However, it is seen as a profession in that providing an obligatory service to the public is strong in the occupational ideology (Aldridge and Evetts 2003). Historically, journalists’ difficulties in securing jurisdictional control over practice—through, for example, the proximity of public relations—have undermined attempts to raise status and standing (Abbott 1988). Professionalism is a prominent

occupational concern within sports journalism that stems from its toy-department label (Salwen and Garrison 1998). To improve its professional reputation, sports journalism must pay close adherence to occupational values and principles, such as objectivity, impartiality, autonomy and public service (Deuze 2005).

Sports journalists must also show a commitment to quality journalism via practice through critical and inquiring approaches (Boyle 2006). They are expected to adopt independent stances that enable them to draw attention to both corruption and abuse of power (Rowe 2017) and social justice issues (Weedon et al. 2018). These can be source-driven investigations, such as Andrew Jennings' work on the FIFA corruption scandal (Rowe 2017), or more distanced commentator positions, for example, U.S. sportswriter David Zirin 'consistently addresses sport-related social issues (e.g., power relations inequality and human rights in sport) in his blog, books, and also in mainstream venues like *Sports Illustrated*' (Forde and Wilson 2018, p. 68). Sports journalists are encouraged to use their power, privilege and audience reach to give a voice to marginalised and under-represented groups (Forde and Wilson 2018). However, sports journalists must strive to achieve quality journalism when the forces of the digital age have challenged the very foundations of their occupational base (Hutchins and Rowe 2012).

Sports journalists have been unable to maintain exclusivity over their practices with fans themselves now offering opinion and analysis on sports events (Hutchins and Rowe 2012; Bradshaw and Minogue 2020). Sports journalists' reputation for being 'fans with notebooks' and the perceived lack of professional distance with sources and criticality in reporting have called into question their distinctiveness and difference from bloggers (McEnnis 2017). Sports journalists have also increasingly found themselves disempowered within a narrow source environment of professional sports that has left them exposed to attempts to censor and control their work, mainly through threats of expulsion and excommunication from press briefings and conferences (Sugden and Tomlinson 2007; Sherwood et al. 2017a). Boyle (2006, p. 43) notes that journalists used to enjoy close access with athletes, but this ended in the 1980s 'As money flowed into the higher echelons of professional sport from television, the cultural and financial gap between journalists and sports stars grew apace'. Football clubs have since become more brand and publicity conscious, which has resulted in close media management and policing of journalists (Sherwood et al. 2017a). For example, Bradshaw and Minogue (2020) describe how the Newcastle Chronicle was banned by football club Newcastle United in the UK in 2013 for covering a fan protest against the owner, Mike Ashley.

Clubs have also invested heavily in their own media operations to drive their aggressive global commercial strategies (Bradshaw and Minogue 2020). These shifts have had implications for sports journalists' access to professional sportspeople as sports clubs and organisations have now become competitors as well as sources (Sherwood et al. 2017b). Sports journalists' boundary work to distinguish themselves from public relations has also proved to be a struggle with established newspaper sports journalists becoming 'poachers turned gamekeepers' and moving into team media roles (Mirer 2019, 2022; Perreault and Bell 2022).

Sports journalists' attempts to improve standards in practice have become more difficult to achieve in digital settings where clickbait is currency (Ramon and Tulloch 2021) and work routines have intensified (Moritz 2015). Practitioners must now write stories, post blogs, curate social media and produce video in a 24/7 rolling news environment (Moritz 2015; Daum and Scherer 2018). The online sports desk has become a 'toy department within a toy department' as the office-based routines of digitally native sports journalists contradicts the notion of fieldwork as central to the professional culture (McEnnis 2020). Historically, sports journalists' reportage of live events has been a central aspect of practice. However, sports journalists now live blog and/or live tweet the spectacle due to the immediacy offered by digital and social media (McEnnis 2016; Bradshaw and Minogue 2020). Technological disruption has led Randles (2021) to wonder whether the match report, a more traditional form of practice, is now redundant. Coverage of off-field issues has

taken hold in sports journalism with [Moritz and Mirer \(2021, p. 139\)](#) noting, ‘There’s no professional currency in being the first to report that the Yankees beat the Red Sox, 3-2, in a game. There is professional currency in being the first to report that Aaron Boone will be fired as the Yankees manager’.

Shifting digital-media dynamics have also led to changes in the decision making of what is covered and how. Stories have become increasingly shorter due to fear of attention spans among digital audiences, which means depth, detail and context are sacrificed ([Bradshaw and Minogue 2020](#)). There are concerns about journalists plagiarising from other news outlets, with the need for ethical observance in attributing sources becoming more acute ([Hutchins and Rowe 2012](#)). Also, editors—in the pursuit of clicks—have centralised coverage around major sports and the elite teams within them ([Cable and Mottershead 2018](#)). For instance, in football, the top professional leagues in Europe—England’s Premier League, Germany’s Bundesliga and Spain’s Primera Liga—have become hyper-commercialised in recent years. Substantive TV rights deals, driven by satellite technology, have presented opportunities for commercial growth in sponsorship, advertising, and marketing ([Boyle and Haynes 2009](#); [Hutchins and Rowe 2012](#)). In this context, sports journalism serves an ideological role as a promotional vehicle for hyper-commercialised sport ([Lowes 1999](#)). The result is homogenous content and a lack of plurality in the mainstream media ([English 2018](#)).

### 2.3. Sports Journalism and the Transfer Story

The transfer (or transaction) story is an established practice in football journalism that consists of ‘the hiring and firing of coaches and other team personnel, a player changing (or wanting to change) teams via trade or free agency, or an update on a player’s injury and availability’ ([Moritz and Mirer 2021, p. 139](#)). Player movement started to become more frequent in the 1990s due to regulatory shifts such as the relaxing of homegrown player quotas in Europe and the Bosman ruling that allowed players freedom to move clubs upon expiration of their contracts ([Chadwick 2013](#)). Football transfer news has intensified periods of the year that correspond to the January and August transfer windows ([Chadwick 2013](#)). Transfer stories make a significant contribution to the always-on sports consumption in a 24/7 news culture by providing sustenance for football fans between sports events ([Sugden and Tomlinson 2010](#)). The genre exists in other sports, particularly in the United States where trade deadlines and free agency occur ([Reed and Harrison 2019](#)).

Transfer news fuels chatter and gossip within fan communities and are ‘among those quick online stories that provide metrics to media organisations’ ([Rojas-Torrijos and Mello 2021, p. 626](#)). However, the transfer genre raises questions for the veracity and reliability of the stories produced ([Smith 2017](#); [Reed and Harrison 2019](#); [Rojas-Torrijos and Mello 2021](#)). Speculation that fails to materialise is not later corrected by news outlets but is instead quietly forgotten ([Silverman 2015](#)). Transfer stories are part of a narrow sports news agenda that is likely to lead to speculation on a handful of big European clubs ([Stanton 2016](#)). Sports journalism places the act of verification and ‘truth-holders’ in the hands of the clubs themselves, thus further cementing their power and control ([Sherwood et al. 2017a](#)).

[Reed and Harrison’s \(2019\)](#) content analysis of NBA trades found unsourced transactions dominated over sourced ones. [Rojas-Torrijos and Mello’s \(2021\)](#) study of Twitter posts and news stories across four major European news outlets in the 2020 winter transfer window discovered that an average of 45.1% of transfer stories on Twitter materialised with only 41% on websites. These news outlets ‘had no qualms about publishing a number of tip-offs, speculations and statements coming from anonymous sources’ and ‘offered more analysis, opinions and statements on rumours about three or four teams in each league than factual news about transfers/loans relating to them’ ([Rojas-Torrijos and Mello 2021, p. 636](#)).

### 2.4. Sports Journalism and Twitter

Sports journalists use Twitter for a range of activities, including publishing news and opinion, sourcing stories, and promoting work ([Sheffer and Schultz 2010](#); [Price et al. 2012](#);

Reed 2013; Shermak 2018; Oelrichs 2020). However, Twitter's accessibility, in which any user can post opinions on sports, has raised questions over professional expertise and distinctiveness (McEnnis 2013).

Sports journalists have realised that certain established norms and values do not map effectively onto social media. For instance, the scoop, a story that has not been reported on before, has a short lifespan on social media before the competition reacts (Moritz and Mirer 2021). Sports journalists, in their early adoption of Twitter, tried to hold on to scoops for the morning newspaper (McEnnis 2013), but these stories now tend to be published on Twitter with core news platforms focusing on contextualisation and analysis (Moritz and Mirer 2021).

Twitter has, in turn, reshaped approaches to sports journalism with scoops now being the domain of a few elite practitioners who possess excellent contacts rather than a general expectation (Moritz and Mirer 2021). Reporting on play-by-play outcomes does not generate much interest on social media in likes and retweets, unlike analysis, opinion, and visual content (Shermak 2018). Sports journalists are therefore incentivised to focus on subjectivity and opinion on Twitter. Sheffer and Schultz's (2010) content analysis revealed opinion dominated even though sports journalists thought they prioritised breaking news on Twitter.

Sports journalists are now expected to engage with audiences across Web 2.0 platforms (Sherwood and Nicholson 2013), but this interaction is particularly intense on Twitter because of constant real-time updates (Price et al. 2013). This engagement could potentially bring sports journalists closer to audiences and provide a public service by stimulating healthy debate (McEnnis 2018). However, sports journalists often have a fractious relationship with audiences in contending with vitriolic abuse and accusations of bias (Antunovic 2019; Kilvington and Price 2021; Rushden 2023).

### 2.5. Social Media, Personal Branding and Influencing

Social media have led to greater individualisation and autonomy for sports journalists as editors and news organisations have struggled to retain control and surveillance (McEnnis 2021). Journalists are now expected to develop their own personal brands on social media (Molyneux and Holton 2015; Olausson 2018). Brand building can be defined as journalists adopting and adapting marketing techniques that involve not only 'how their reporting is perceived but also on how they themselves are perceived' (Molyneux and Holton 2015, p. 236). These marketing and celebrified features include providing insight into personal lives in addition to professional ones and building communities, talking about themselves, drawing attention to praise they have received, and making connections with audiences based on emotion, interaction and, potentially, collaboration. (Molyneux and Holton 2015; Olausson 2018).

Brand building also involves developing a clear persona (such as Romano's identity as a transfer specialist) that allows for self-commodification, which translates into market value (Brems et al. 2017). Further, celebrified journalism features a coherent and ubiquitous self-presentation across social media sites (Olausson 2018), which speaks to Romano's own multi-platform and multimedia approach. Consequently, journalists prioritise subjectivity over objectivity in the brand-building process as 'journalists . . . use Twitter primarily to argue with others and to share their opinions' (Brems et al. 2017, p. 452). This emphasis on subjectivity in personal branding has prompted the suggestion that there has been a turn to emotional journalism (Beckett 2017).

The notion of 'influencer' and 'influencing' goes beyond personal branding and brand building in that it involves commercial relationships and makes advertising a form of content (Duffy 2020). Romano adopts strong influencer elements in addition to traditional journalistic ones in that he is utilised by both news and non-news organisations. For example, in August 2021, Romano appeared in a short video on the Spanish football club Valencia's Twitter account as part of the announcement that Brazilian striker Marcos Andre had joined from Real Valladolid, thus blurring the distinction between team media and

journalism. Romano can also be considered an influencer in his impact among industry and audiences because his catchphrase, 'Here We Go' has become definitive for when a deal is complete (Smith 2022).

Brand building and influencing have created professional challenges for journalists. Molyneux and Holton (2015, p. 226) note that self-promotion 'does not fit with long-held notions of journalistic objectivity and the separation of editorial and advertising practices'. Brems et al.'s (2017) study found a tension between traditional one-way information providing and networked, interactive communication, balancing facts with opinion, and combining the personal with the professional.

### 3. Research Design

#### 3.1. Research Objectives and Questions

This study analyses an influencer–sports journalist's approach to Twitter practice to assess how it informs professionalism in the digital age. Professionalism is defined as close observance of principles such as objectivity, impartiality, autonomy, and public service as defined by Deuze (2005) combined with high standards of practice, which include the prioritisation of news over opinion (Sheffer and Schultz 2010) and the need for critical and inquiring sports journalism (Boyle 2006; Rowe 2017; Forde and Wilson 2018; Weedon et al. 2018). There were two research questions:

(RQ1): How does Fabrizio Romano use Twitter in the context of sports journalism practice?

(RQ2): What does Fabrizio Romano's approach to Twitter mean for understandings of sports journalism professionalism as defined by the relationship between principles and practice?

To answer these questions, a content and textual analysis was conducted on Fabrizio Romano's tweets and replies during a one-month period. Twitter is only one aspect of Romano's journalistic output. However, Twitter has become a significant aspect of sports journalism practice and has been integral to Romano's brand building.

#### 3.2. Method

Content analysis is a common method used in exploring sports journalism practice in the digital age (e.g., Hardin and Ash 2011; Rojas-Torrijos and Mello 2021). The representative sample chosen for this research, taken across a month (November 2022), was influenced by Rojas-Torrijos and Mello's (2021) study that considered tweets and articles across four news organisations within the same period. November was selected as a representative month because it occurs during the football season, although the transfer windows of January and August are likely to yield different results based on the more intense focus around player movement. A month was considered a sufficient period for data collection due to the likely prolific tweeting from a sports journalism influencer.

Sports journalism practice was coded and categorised according to themes synthesised from the literature review. Specifically, the categories that related to transfer news and confirmation trades emerged from the issues of attribution and sourcing explored in the relevant literature (Hutchins and Rowe 2012; Reed and Harrison 2019; Rojas-Torrijos and Mello 2021). The categories on news and opinion arose from professional concerns that sports journalists prioritise subjectivity over objectivity (Oates and Pauly 2007; Sheffer and Schultz 2010). Play-by-play reporting related to how social media is now used to convey live game action (Randles 2021), and the reply and retweet categories reflected Twitter's communicative and architectural functions (Shermak 2018).

The personal and promotional categories emerged from the exploration of influencer culture (Molyneux and Holton 2015; Brems et al. 2017; Olausson 2018). Journalists are now expected to build a brand via tweeting about their personal lives and promoting their work and the organisations that employ them. These categories can potentially be a source of tension for traditional understandings of professionalism, which require journalists to be objective, distanced, transparent and editorially independent (Molyneux and Holton 2015).

Sports journalism practice was coded and categorised as follows:

*Transfer News (unattributed)* is a composite of two sub-categories as follows:

*Transfer News (sourced)*: This category speaks to Romano's reputation as a football transfer specialist and involves tweets that meet [Moritz and Mirer's \(2021, p. 139\)](#) definition of transfer and transactional news as 'the hiring and firing of coaches and other team personnel, a player changing (or wanting to change) teams via trade or free agency, or an update on a player's injury and availability'. These tweets needed to indicate the source of the story through naming or quoting.

*Transfer News (unsourced)*: This category involves tweets that related to the same definition of the transfer story, but the source was unnamed and undeclared.

*Transfer News (attributed)*: Authored tweets on a topical transfer development that was originally reported by a different news organisation or journalist. The original source was then attributed in the tweet.

*Confirmed*: Transfer news that has a concrete and final outcome: e.g., a player signing a contract or a manager joining a new club.

*Other News (unattributed)*: Football news tweets not related to transfer stories and not attributed to another news organisation or journalist.

*Other News (attributed)*: Football news tweets not related to transfer stories and attributed to another news organisation or journalist as the source of the information.

*Play-by-play Reporting*: 'Live' tweets of occurrences during sports events, delivered in an objective, factual and neutral commentary. Subjective comments on the live sports event were filed under Opinion.

*Replies*: Responses to other tweets or replies to comments on one's own tweets.

*Retweets*: Retweets of tweets posted either from one's own or other accounts.

*Opinion*: Tweets that pass a subjective view or opinion.

*Personal*: Tweets that relate to personal circumstances rather than football coverage.

*Promotional*: Tweets that are recognisably promotional of a service or product.

#### 4. Results

The 2022 World Cup started on 20 November, which was within the data collection period. The draw for the Champions League knock-out stages also took place in this timeframe, with eight consecutive tweets that announced the fixtures being filed under Other News (unattributed).

A major sports news story in this period concerned Manchester United player Cristiano Ronaldo being interviewed for a Piers Morgan TV show episode, which subsequently led to his departure from the club. During November 2022, Romano tweeted at least once every day with an average of 16.5 tweets per day and 0.7 per hour. The fact that Romano tweeted nearly once per hour on average speaks to an intensification of sports journalism practice ([Moritz 2015](#)) and the demands and expectations that social media have placed on practitioners with the need to be constantly tweeting and retaining visibility ([McEnnis 2013](#)).

Data collection uncovered potentially blurred areas of categorisation. For example, Romano seems to have invented his own genre of sports reportage whereby he will mention a footballer who is doing something significant on the field of play at that moment and then will indicate the player's transfer or contractual status. These were not considered as transfer stories as the transactional aspect of the tweet was incidental. Instead, these tweets were classified as either play-by-play commentary or opinion depending on which category's criterion was met. A tweet was filed under Play-by-Play Reporting if it contained straight reportage without subjective comment ('First game, first start, first goal for Denis Zakaria as Chelsea player/ on 2/11), whereas it was filed under Opinion if there was an element of subjective commentary ('Three goals in three World Cup games for Marcus Rashford—looks a completely different player in the last few months' on 29/11).

There was one promotional tweet recorded ('Are you ready fo (sic) to Defy The Noise? Here we go #ad') (see [Table 1](#)). However, there were promotional elements within the Retweets category. There were also crossover elements with responses to users constituting

an opinion expressed but these tweets were still filed under Replies to avoid subjective researcher judgments.

**Table 1.** Fabrizio Romano's tweets in November 2022 categorised by markers of professional practice.

Tweeting Category	No. of Tweets	Tweet %
Transfer news (unattributed)	120	24.3
Transfer news (attributed)	83	16.8
Confirmed	32	6.5
Other News (unattributed)	102	20.6
Other news (attributed)	30	6.1
Play-by-Play Reporting	10	2
Replies	49	9.9
Retweets	52	10.5
Opinion	11	2.2
Personal	4	0.8
Promotional	1	0.2
Total	494	100

Retweets with comments were also a problematic area for recording purposes, and it needed to be determined whether these posts constituted a properly authored tweet or were incidental to the retweet. A judgement was therefore made on the substantive nature of the comment. For example, on 25 November, Romano retweeted his own tweet from October 8 saying that Chelsea will appoint Christopher Vivell as new technical director with the comment '... just matter of time'. This tweet was not considered to be a meaningful update to the transfer story in either length or content so was filed under retweet. However, on November 15, Romano retweeted his own tweet from four days earlier stating Sporting Lisbon has reached full agreement to sign Mateo Tanlongo from Rosario Central with the comment 'Sporting will complete Mateo Tanlongo deal in the next hours. Deal done and sealed, full agreement in place since last week. Tanlongo will join Sporting in January from Rosario Central'. Because of the substantive nature of this comment in length and content, this tweet was filed under Transfer News (unattributed).

Further, tweets filed under the Transfer Story (unattributed) and Other News (unattributed) categories cannot be considered as solely consisting of originally sourced tweets that derived from Romano's primary newsgathering (although they would contain them). For example, Romano was actively tweeted about a breaking story about Cristiano Ronaldo giving an interview to the TV presenter and journalist Piers Morgan on the ITV show 'Cristiano Ronaldo meets Piers Morgan' on UK television. The interview included outspoken comments from Ronaldo about his club, Manchester United. These tweets were generally attributed to the show as their source, and so they were filed under Other News (attributed). However, Romano tweeted comments from Ronaldo that were not attributed, and so these needed to be filed under Other News (unattributed). It cannot be interpreted with certainty that these quotations came from the same secondary source, even though it is very likely.

This ambiguity points to a potential new ethical order in sports journalism where there are two interpretations here. On the one hand, the tweet can be considered unethical for not enacting the ethical norm of attribution, but it could be argued that attribution was implied due to the context of other connected tweets around it that were attributed.

The results showed that football news dominated Romano's Twitter output in November 2022 with the top five news-related categories registering 74.3% of tweets (see Table 1). In comparison, Opinion—which previous research has found to be a prominent activity by sports journalists and brand builders (Sheffer and Schultz 2010; Brems et al. 2017) on Twitter—constituted 2.2% of tweets (see Table 1). This finding is significant in that sports journalists' emphasis on subjectivity rather than objectivity is a key reason for their lowly toy-department reputation (Oates and Pauly 2007).

The Other News (attributed) and Other News (unattributed) sections predominantly related to team and player news. Aside from the Cristiano Ronaldo television interview mentioned above, topics mainly consisted of the Champions League knock-out draw, World Cup squad announcements and player withdrawals through injuries from these squads.

Notably, there were no tweets about the controversy of the World Cup starting in Qatar, a country with human rights issues, which was a key talking point in sports journalism during the data collection period. For example, the BBC's Gabby Logan and Gary Lineker both produced blogs stating their conflicted positions in covering the World Cup (Lineker 2022; Logan 2022). The closest that Romano's tweets came to critical journalism, relating to off-field issues and as defined in this study, were tweets on a Manchester United board of directors' statement into exploring strategic alternatives for the club (Nov 22), the Juventus board resigning (28/11), and that a pitch invader at the World Cup had been released by police (29/11). The Opinion category generally involved positive comments on player performance rather than offering a critique on the world of professional football.

Transfer News (attributed) and Other News (attributed) are reflective of the move towards sharing and reposting information from other news sources (Hutchins and Rowe 2012). These tweets seemed to help sustain regular updates from Romano's Twitter account in between authored Transfer News (unattributed) and Other News (unattributed) posts. The Confirmed category was a minor percentage of tweets at 6.5% (see Table 1) because of the timing of this study being outside of football's transfer-window deadlines in August and January. These confirmations often related to footballers signing new contracts with existing employers, pre-contract agreements with new teams or managers leaving or joining teams.

Play-by-play Reporting, considered to be a staple of sports journalism practice, registered only 2% of tweets (see Table 1). This finding speaks to the changing relationship between sports journalists and live events (Shermak 2018; Moritz and Mirer 2021; Randles 2021).

Personal tweets registered 0.8% of the total dataset (see Table 1), a finding that does not conform with expectations of brand building (Molyneux and Holton 2015; Beckett 2017; Olausson 2018). Personal tweets were oriented towards brand development in that they were related to awards. These tweets involved Romano being nominated for, and winning, the Globe Soccer best football journalist award and the Football Content Award for best influencer. There were also replies relating to these personal developments with Romano thanking Twitter users who were congratulating him.

Replies constituted 9.9% of total tweets (see Table 1), which showed there was a willingness to engage with users, although this was not a prominent category in Romano's approach to Twitter. The results showed that 18.4% of replies to users (9 of 49) were responses to comments on Romano's journalistic prowess and performance. A key element of brand building is journalists talking about and drawing attention to themselves (Molyneux and Holton 2015). In these scenarios, Romano conducted boundary work to defend his journalistic reputation. One Twitter user posted 'fab knows nothing about Arsenal he's not reliable for Arsenal just repeats what other people say'. Romano responded by retweeting a post that attributed him with reporting that Arsenal have asked for information on Mykhailo Mudryk with the comment 'probably you forgot this call on Mudryk and Arsenal last summer mate (winking emoji) August 29 ... I'll update you if Arsenal will make an official proposal. No update yet' (19/11). However, there were also replies to positive tweets from users. One Twitter user posted: 'he doesn't make up fake stories or throw links to random players unlike many other journalists' to which Romano responded, 'thanks mate—I don't like fake news or stories ... this content was not to push any transfer or signing, just to explain the project and the whole process' (8/11).

Sourced transfer stories are a marker of ethical and transparent practice within the genre (Reed and Harrison 2019; Rojas-Torrijos and Mello 2021). The data showed that 61.7% of Romano's authored tweets (see Table 2) were unsourced (i.e., they did not indicate a source), which is slightly lower than Reed and Harrison's finding of 66.4%. According to these findings, Romano is injecting more, but not significantly greater, sourcing into transfer stories than what previous research has found.

**Table 2.** Number and percentage of sourced and unsourced tweets under the Transfer News (unattributed) category.

Transf. News (Unattributed)	No. of Tweets	Tweet %
Sourced	46	38.3
Unsourced	74	61.7
Total	120	100

Romano did mention agents as sources, such as a tweet about Napoli player Khvicha Kvaratskhelia that also contained a link to an interview with agent Christian Emile on Romano's YouTube channel. The naming of sources could be impacted by the 280-character limit on each tweet. Romano's named contacts consisted of player agents, players, managers, directors, and chief executives, which does not represent a departure from traditional understandings of 'official' sources (Sherwood et al. 2017a).

Romano's tweets related to men's football and his authored transfer tweets focused on the wealthiest clubs in the main European leagues of England, Germany, Italy, and Spain. This finding is consistent with previous research that has discovered sports journalists are operating in an increasingly narrow sports news environment that prioritises major football clubs (Cable and Mottershead 2018).

In some cases, clubs were mentioned on only one occasion because their player had attracted interest from one of the leading European teams. Palmeiras, a Brazilian club based in Sao Paolo, was mentioned three times (2%—see Table 3) due to the story being circulated that its player Endrick was attracting interest from Real Madrid, Chelsea, and Paris-Saint Germain. Other clubs were mentioned once because of noteworthy developments, such as highly rated midfielder Pablo Marin about to sign a new contract with Real Sociedad (6/11).

**Table 3.** Number and percentage of times that clubs were mentioned in the Transfer News (Unattributed) category.

Club	No. of Mentions	Mention %
Barcelona	14	9.3
Chelsea	12	8
Real Madrid	11	7.3
Manchester United	10	6.6
Paris Saint-Germain	9	6
Arsenal	7	4.6
Inter Milan	6	4
Manchester City	5	3.3
Bayern Munich	5	3.3
AS Roma	5	3.3
Liverpool	5	3.3
AC Milan	5	3.3
Borussia Dortmund	4	2.6
Brighton & Hove Albion	4	2.6
Inter Miami	3	2
Newcastle United	3	2
Palmeiras	3	2
Tottenham	2	1.3
Napoli	2	1.3
West Ham United	2	1.3
Lazio	2	1.3
PSV Eindhoven	2	1.3
Sporting Lisbon	2	1.3
Dynamo Moscow	2	1.3
Other (clubs mentioned once)	26	61.7
Total	151	100

Romano's approach to transfer stories is international in scope, which demonstrates how sports journalism practice has globalised (Boyle 2006). Sports journalism is classically organised according to the beat system whereas sports journalists concentrate on one team. Romano's sports journalism is versatile and agile, which enables him to develop contacts across multiple clubs. He is effectively operating as his own news brand and is not anchored to the physical constraints of covering the press conferences and live events of a particular club.

Although promotional authored tweets were low at 0.2 per cent of the overall sample (see Table 4), Romano's highlighting of his journalistic work was predominantly through retweets. Accounts retweeted on more than one occasion were outlets where his work was being published or his own previous tweets that either repeated recent news in case users missed it the first time or to remind audiences that he was first or correct with stories. There were signs in Romano's retweets that his broader journalistic output contained subjective opinions, such as an 888 Sport post that linked to one of his articles and stated: 'Juventus are a mess and the club needs a long term solution. Here @FabrizioRomano pens his thoughts on Juve and what they will do to solve their current problem' (30/11). Two retweets involved non-journalistic promotion, which is where brand building crosses into influencing. One was from the Sorare account, a fantasy football game, that posted: 'Look who's ready for the Global Cup! Our man @FabrizioRomano gives you 5 breakout candidates to consider for your Sorare #GlobalCup22 team. Sign up now, it's completely free to play! (link inserted)' (15/11). The other retweet was from Hisense Sports, an electrical appliances company sponsoring the World Cup, that read: 'The Hisense #PerfectMatch Tour will be launched on Nov. 21 at the City Walk in Dubai, HERE WE GO! Follow @hisensesports for a behind-the-scenes look at our journey to the #FIFAWorldCup Qatar 2022 and exclusive content from everyone's favorite leged @KAKA!' (19/11).

**Table 4.** The Twitter accounts retweeted by Fabrizio Romano.

Retweeted Accounts	No. of Tweets	Retweet %
Caught Offside	22	43.1
Own Twitter Account	18	35.3
888 Sport	3	5.9
Other (retweeted once)	8	15.7
Total	51	100

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study focused on a key influencer in sports journalism who specialises in football transfers with an international reach and significant social media following. Romano's approach to sports journalism practice is situated in classic norms and values of contacts, scoops, and transfer stories. However, this traditional outlook is adapted to a fast-paced and interactive 24/7 social media environment.

The research found Romano's tweets were situated in the hyper-commercialised aspects of sports journalism, that of transfer news involving mainly prominent football clubs. Romano is professionalising sports journalism activity in the move away from subjectivity towards objectivity and the focus on news rather than opinion. Romano's persona is built on professional activity rather than personal insights. Romano therefore subverts understandings of personal branding and influencing that emphasise the personal, subjectivity, and opinion (Molyneux and Holton 2015; Brems et al. 2017; Olausson 2018).

Romano displayed elements of influencer culture in the retweets from the accounts of products or services, specifically Sorare and Hisense. Journalistic brand building was evident in retweets of his work on other platforms and interactions with followers as he defended criticism and highlighted praise for his work. One authored tweet indicated that the post was an advertisement, although the retweets for Sorare and Hisense did not clearly separate the advertising from the editorial, which arguably could have been addressed with

a comment on the retweet to indicate its commercial nature. The use of Romano's 'Here We Go' catchphrase in the Hisense Sports retweet suggests it is employed as an advertising slogan as well as a journalistic one.

Romano adopts the ethical practice of attributing news from other journalistic sources to help sustain his prodigious rate of tweeting, which is indicative of the intensification of sports journalism practice (Moritz 2015). The republishing of or linking to others' work is not unique to Romano and has become a widespread sports journalism practice in the digital age (Hutchins and Rowe 2012). On the one hand, a prominent sports journalist such as Romano can divert attention away from other practitioners, including the original sources of the story who deserve to receive credit. Conversely, it can be argued that Romano's posting of attributed tweets raises visibility and attention to the work of those journalists. Romano was prepared to compliment other news sources for their scoops. For example, Romano tweeted 'Great One' in reply to CBS Sports reporter James Benge posting the exclusive that Al Nassr was the first club to offer Cristiano Ronaldo a contract following his departure from Manchester United (30 November).

Romano's tweets included very little play-by-play commentary, which adds to the debate on the continued significance of game coverage to contemporary sports journalism practice (Shermak 2018; Moritz and Mirer 2021; Randles 2021).

The tweets did not highlight the controversy of the World Cup taking place in Qatar with its human rights record, even though this was a key talking point within sports journalism during the data collection period. The unattributed tweets did not contain either investigative sports journalism (Rowe 2017) or social justice commentary (Forde and Wilson 2018; Weedon et al. 2018). It may be that Romano adopts this approach beyond the scope of this study, such as in his broader journalistic output or at other times on Twitter. This finding should prompt discussion on whether subjectivity and opinion are desirable on social media, as these approaches allow sports journalists to speak truth to power and draw attention to social injustice.

Romano's approach to professionalism is highly influential on the future trajectory of sports journalism, as it provides practitioners and news organisations with a roadmap to significant followings and audiences. However, this study raises concerns that a shift towards ultra-specialised labour means the responsibility for challenging power and highlighting social justice issues becomes less clear. If the obligation for critical and inquiring sports journalism does not always apply to *all* its practitioners in *all* contexts, then *who* does it apply to and under *what* contexts, conditions and circumstances?

A limitation of this study is that it does not explore whether Romano's transfer stories in the sample materialised. There are indications that Romano was producing scoops that came true, such as the Swedish winger Dejan Kulusevski returning from injury to play for Tottenham (6/11). However, a longer-term assessment of stories in the Transfer News (unattributed) category would have to be made, particularly once the transfer window opened in January, and would warrant a follow-up study. Another limitation is this study specifically analyses Twitter, which constitutes only one aspect of Romano's overall sports journalism practice. Therefore, the data only provide a partial picture of Romano's output, albeit an important one, given the prominence of the platform in sports journalism and its centrality in providing a platform for practitioners such as Romano to substantially grow and develop their profiles.

Romano is not the only sports journalist with more than a million Twitter followers who specialises in transfer stories. For example, ESPN's NFL journalist Adam Schefter, The Athletic's NBA reporter Shams Charania and ESPN's National Basketball Association (NBA) journalist Adrian Wojnarowski, are prominent in this practice, with the latter, like Romano, having a catchphrase 'Woj Bomb' (Sprung 2021). In football, The Athletic's David Ornstein and Sky Sport Italia's Gianluca Di Marzio have earned similar reputations as elite transfer journalists through cultivation of contacts.

Like Romano, these prominent story-getters have significant social media followings (Schefter 10.1 m on Twitter, Wojnarowski 5.7 m, Charania 2 m and Ornstein 1.1 m). This

article shows the benefits of taking a case study approach to sports journalism practice and professionalism in a social media age of highly visible and influential practitioners.

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