ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Referees and the Media: A Difficult Relationship but an Unavoidable Necessity

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The Association Football/media relationship has evolved since the sport was covered in newspapers, and on radio and television. The impact of the media on Association Football is undeniable with increased wealth in the game directly attributable to the increasing monetary value of television deals covering the English Premier League. This has, in turn, meant that refereeing decisions are now subject to intensified scrutiny and historically this has been identified as a significant source of pressure for referees. This article has utilised semi-structured interviews with the broadcast media in the UK alongside a notational analysis of 20 live Premier League matches in the 2013-2014 season, in order to analyse the pressure exerted by the media on referees. Findings indicate that the pressure on referees is not as great as previously accepted. The interviews and notational analysis demonstrate a more considered interpretation of the role of the referee today in Association Football.

Keywords: elite referees; media; association football; sport/media relationship; pressure.

Sport occupies a prominent place in contemporary social life. Professional sport in particular has a significant popular appeal and has considerable economic and cultural significance. From the late nineteenth century, and throughout the twentieth century, one sport after another embraced professionalism and became more business-like and commercially orientated. The economic transformation of sport has had consequences for the ethos of sport, for the values that have traditionally been part of the games, and for the administration and on-field/in-play officiating of games, matches and events. As a consequence of this evolution within association football there have been significant economic and commercial changes alongside an increase in international competitions throughout the twentieth century that have helped to transform the game. This economic transformation has had consequences for football, the values that have traditionally been a part of the game, and for the administration of matches. In short the actions and accountability of officials or referees have become more important as the potential economic significance of any decisions they make having a bearing on competitive success and failure has increased.

With the growth of global television coverage following the development of satellite communication technology a number of professional sports have benefited from increased exposure. In particular there has been a significant increase in the television coverage and global diffusion of the association code of football, especially the leading professional leagues. The increased media exposure has raised the profile of all those involved in the game, including players, managers, referees, and even some administrators.

This situation in which referees and their decisions have become the focus of increasing focus has developed significantly over time in tandem with the changes

already identified above. This article considers the relationship between the media and referees in the professional arena of the Premier League and elite refereeing in England.

Inception and Growth of the Sports/Media Relationship

The growth of the written press and in particular the development of sport specific periodicals was synonymous with the advancement of football, and other sports in Great Britain¹. As sport became popularised into the twentieth century, this was reflected in the column inches that it was afforded to it in national papers². This developing symbiotic relationship between football and the written press (the dominant media at the turn of the twentieth century) was a togetherness which would serve both well as these two areas evolved together³.

It was evident as early as 1822 that sport helped to sell newspapers with *Bell's Life* in London increasing its circulation after including sports reports in the publication⁴ and by 1880 it was also clear that football sold newspapers⁵. Popular interest during the late 19th century was extensive, and information about the matches was welcomed in public houses across the country. Many public houses kept score of the games and displayed these scores on boards for the public⁶ and Saturday evening sports newspapers, often in coloured paper, reported the afternoon's scores to the public shortly after the matches had finished⁷. The growth of the sporting press was assisted by the introduction of the 1870 Education Act, which produced a new reading public and a demand for sports magazines. As such, from the 1880s the *Sportsman*, *Sporting Life* and the *Sporting Chronicle* were all selling 300,000 copies a day⁸. The launch of mass circulation newspapers in 1896 followed, and the newly established *Daily Mail* also included sports pages, with at least 10% of the publication devoted to sport⁹.

The invention and subsequent growth of radio introduced and established in the 1920s as a mass medium around the world, familiarised sport to a wider audience.

Specifically in Great Britain, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) expanded the range and scope of sport broadcasting throughout the 1920's, 1930's and 1940's with the FA Cup Final one of the events covered¹⁰. Despite the success of radio and the undoubted growth in interest that this medium sustained in sport in Great Britain, it was the introduction of television that has transformed professional football in the way in which it is organized, played and spectated¹¹.

The first televised broadcast of live sport was seen in Great Britain in 1937 and by 1938 the first pictures of an international football match were televised, England versus Scotland¹². Television was fully launched in 1946, and by 1950 television was being received in 340,000 households¹³.

The growing popularity of football and the subsequent development of the game led to numerous changes in the sport during the 1940's to 1970's, a period which Taylor refers to as football's boom period¹⁴. These changes were not restricted to the money that players were earning or that clubs were paying for the players. Indeed, arguably the biggest change in Association Football was the development and growth of media involvement.

The inter war years of the twentieth century helped the shaping of the present character of football. This shaping of the game has been achieved, amongst other things, through the, developments in football based media events, the intensifying commercialisation of the game and the increasing grip of a technicised, expert's view of the game¹⁵. These continued throughout the twentieth and twenty first centuries and directly impacted the game, and consequently the referee and the pressure that these individuals began to experience once media exposure increased. This growth in television provision and accessibility did much to increase the profile of football. It was clear football and television were about to become linked in the 1950's. However, the

footballing authorities have always been ambiguous about the relationship that they have with television¹⁶.

Television and the Increased Finances in Football

The introduction of Independent Television (ITV) and the eventual competition between the newly formed television station and the BBC was the precursor to much of what happens with television rights today. The BBC initially had a monopoly over the sports that it had been showing, although ITV did compete for the rights to screen Wimbledon in the late 1950's¹⁷. This competition between television companies was something that was to become commonplace in sport, and more specifically football over the coming years.

The increase in media exposure of Association Football has, in turn, led to an increase in pressure for referees that can be closely aligned with the increased financial aspect now an integral part of the game. As money has flowed into the accounts of national leagues and football clubs, there has been a consistently growing interest in the game. The Premier League in England, for example, is now broadcast by 80 different networks, watched in 212 countries by 4.7 billion people in 643 million homes (As of October 8, 2014, on The Premier League website). The finance in the Premier League has been boosted by the rapid increase of televised football that has been brokered ostensibly by the Premier League itself.

The English Premier League was seen as a potential flagship for the emerging pay per view service, and as such in 1992 signed an initial £304 million five year deal, and after the success that this demonstrated followed this by agreeing to a deal worth £670 million over four years once the original deal ended in 1997¹⁸. Furthermore, in 2002 the following Premier League TV rights were sold for £1.6 billion for four years¹⁹. BSkyB not only identified the Premier League as the focal point for the launch of the

service in Great Britain, but also targeted football as the only sport that was capable of attracting significant numbers of new viewers and subscribers to the service²⁰.

The latest domestic Premier League broadcasting deal with SKY (2010–2013) is worth £1.782bn, compared with £1.7bn over the period 2007–2010²¹, whereas BT has recently acquired the rights for 38 matches for £738 million (As of October 8, 2014, on The Telegraph website).

This increased financial expenditure essentially means that television companies require football to continue their expansion and the game requires the television money in order to continue to grow as a product. Sporting events are evidently particularly attractive to media companies as they evoke powerful imagery and emotional responses from their spectators²². This increased money, profile and the imagery attached by the media companies means that there is heightened pressure on these companies to ‘sell’ football. Therefore, because of the money and rewards available for success, there is an associated pressure on players, managers and also referees as the individuals that have the power to influence the outcome of a match or season with one decision.

The Impact of the Media upon Referees

The relationship between sport and the media, although highly profitable for both sides, can be an uneasy or arguably uneven one with both institutions becoming mutually dependent²³. Sporting events, fixtures and even competitions can be rescheduled or redesigned at the request of television companies in order to maximise viewing figures and marketing opportunities. Some sports, such as football, have become dependent on the media²⁴, as the relationship with the media is cemented, amongst other things, by exclusive media coverage rights which exert high levels of control²⁵.

The development of technology has brought its own pressures for referees. The significant investment in coverage and infrastructure by media and television companies has in turn created new challenges for the broadcasting of sport and the sports industry. These challenges for referees such as the number of matches shown and the time and technology devoted to the scrutiny of matches, have meant that their decisions are, predictably, often scrutinised at great length²⁶. This is unsurprising given the number of matches shown, and the time and technology devoted to the analysis of matches. Although this is not a new problem, the pressure that referees find themselves under in football today is unprecedented²⁷.

Matches tend to be determined as much on decisions about tenuous penalty kicks or marginal offside decisions as on the superior play of one team²⁸. Assistant Referees, positioned at the side of the pitch usually give the offside decisions, with the referee subsequently deciding whether to uphold the judgement and decision of the assistant referees. These refereeing decisions can be pivotal for a team's prospects of winning championships, qualifying for lucrative European competition or avoiding relegation. Therefore, as revenue streams and sales of broadcast rights have grown in football, criticism of referee behaviour has allegedly intensified²⁹, and this criticism has become accepted as being part of the common societal environment³⁰.

Colwell's paper entitled "Public enemy no. 1!" Television commentators and our perception of referees³¹, examines a number of incidents from televised matches during the 2000-01 season, and considers the effect this coverage has had on the popular perception of referees. The roles and influence commentators can have upon how people discern referees are discussed, with the case of Martin Tyler and Andy Gray and their match commentary and remarks concerning referees utilised as a case study. Gray claimed he was making a split-second judgement during his commentary or analysis,

calling the action 'as it happens', 'first time', and reacting to incidents 'in the same way as the referee'³² and therefore criticism of the match official for making a 'wrong' decision on an incident was credible. The accuracy of Gray's decision making in 'real time' during the match, when referring to refereeing decisions is questioned, as is his claim to be 'reacting in the same way as the referee', due to his use of slow motion replays and the qualification of his views on the incidents highlighted in the case study.

The purpose of the present study is to examine the evolving media view and representation of referees in the English Premier League, given the changes to the media/sport and in particular, football relationship that have been documented over time and especially since the inception of the Premier League. More specifically this article considers whether the media do increase the pressure on referees, as the literature currently supposes, through the use of notational analysis of Premier League matches and through semi structured interviews with member of the broadcast media in the United Kingdom.

Method

Participants

The individuals for the research were selected through the use of purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method involving the selection and involvement of a particular societal group or sample because of their unique position related to the research³³. The ten participants were all from England and working in the field of televisual sports media with a specialised focus upon professional football. All participants agreed to take part in this research and the research was undertaken according to the ethical guidelines. Respondents were assured of anonymity when they

were contacted and therefore pseudonyms are utilised to protect the identity of the respondents.

Interview Guide

A semi-structured approach was adopted where an identical set of questions was employed in a similar manner. This ensured that there was an element of structure to each of the interviews that was conducted; however, the ordering of the questions was dependent on the responses that were given by each participant, where issues raised were explored by the interviewer. Discussions naturally varied during each interview, due to the semi structured nature of the interviews and the differing responses from the respondents.

Interviews were conducted over the telephone due to the geographical locations of each of the participants. The interviews were recorded in their entirety (ranging from 40 to 75 minutes in duration) and subsequently transcribed *verbatim*. Participants were given information regarding the research, by e-mail or verbally, prior to being interviewed.

Notational Analysis

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, notational analysis was employed. Historically notional analysis has been used as a means of recoding and interpreting players engaged in an activity with the ball and also on tactical or strategic aspect of performance³⁴. Despite this traditional use Hughes and Franks argue that it can be used in any discipline that requires assessment or analysis³⁵.

Notational analysis was not utilized to inform referee performance or for coaching purposes, which is often the case³⁶, rather it was employed to record instances of discussion surrounding the referee during live football matches. Notational analysis

is essentially a means of recording events to ensure that there is an accurate, independent and objective record of the events that took place. In effect it provides a record of critical events in order to quantify a factual record in a consistent and reliable manner³⁷.

20 live Premier League matches in the 2013-2014 season on both Sky Sports and BT Sport were observed and notational analysis was conducted regarding how often the referee in each particular match was mentioned, the particularities of the discussion between the commentator and match analyst, as well as the length of time of the discussion concerning the referee. Furthermore, the post match discussion and analysis of the match was also recorded notationally for 30 minutes following the same method employed during the match.

Data analysis

Interviews

Having transcribed each of the interviews, inductive content analysis was employed in order to analyse the themes generated through the data that was gathered during the interview process. This approach was utilized due to the large amount of data that were generated and to classify the common themes that could be identified through the analysis of the data³⁸. Content analysis affords the researcher a coherent manner of being presented to colleagues for peer dissemination; this type of dissemination can lead to verification of the data analysis process and give the research added 'trustworthiness' through the concept of 'critical friends'³⁹.

To add further credibility to the findings of the research other researchers were involved in the process. This can not only verify and inform the data collection and analysis that has already occurred but also assist the researcher in terms of support, and suggestions that otherwise may not have been considered. In the case of this research

other academics were asked to perform roles in order to give triangulated consensus in the form of “critical friends”⁴⁰. After the initial higher and lower order themes had been identified, the transcribed interview quotations were read and re-read by two academics trained in qualitative research. Each researcher viewed the higher and lower order themes and independently identified and verified the phrases, quotations and themes that they had been asked to consider. These themes and quotations were independently grouped and compared to the initial themes that had been generated; these themes were then placed into general dimensions above which no general meaning could be identified.

As with any interview responses the understanding and expertise of the respondents is crucial to the quality of the information that is analysed. This is no different for journalists and those in the media. It is recognised that journalists are not neutral observers of the social scene. They, as with other individuals that offer opinion, often have preconceived ideas of what is fact and what is fiction⁴¹. However, this research considers the pressure on referees as a consequence of media involvement and as such the fact that any individual may have preconceived ideas of a referee, or refereeing more generally, does not impact on the fact that they comment and report on Association Football.

Notational Analysis

The match information was recorded onto excel spreadsheets during the live match broadcasts. Once this process had been completed the spreadsheets were individually analysed and the matches were then grouped regarding the number of times the referee was discussed. A second tier of analysis was then implemented where comments made by either the commentator, or match summariser during ‘in-game’ ‘live’ commentary were scrutinised and placed into positive, negative, questioning or

neutral categories. These on-air comments were then cross-referenced with the verbatim quotations from the interview transcripts. Specifically the notational analysis of each Premier League match has been used to support and further inform the quotations from the semi structured interview process. Post-match discussion and analysis were also recorded. These comments have been used to support the interview responses and the in-game notational analysis.

Results and Discussion

The results derived from the interview data collection and analysis represent the collated interview responses from all ten participants. The interview responses were related to respondents' perceptions and experience of the media views and relationship with elite Association Football referees in the EPL. The findings of the general dimension are presented in figure 1 which is supported throughout the results and discussion by additional verbatim quotations from the interview transcripts.

Figure 1 near here

This research revisits conclusions in previous research by Colwell (2000, 2001) asserting that a central reason for the discussion and subsequent introduction of goal-line technology is the requirement for referees to get decisions right, and the pressure from the media that this subsequently creates. Colwell⁴² builds the case that the pressure on referees has increased over a prolonged period of time and that referees are powerless to affect this pressure that is inflicted upon them.

Since the introduction of technological assistance for referees in the form of goal-line technology in certain competitions, and discussions regarding an extension of this technological assistance during a match, this article considers whether the pressure on elite referees from the media has continued to increase since 2000. Colwell's

article⁴³ considered the pressure on referees from a refereeing perspective, citing the media as central to this increased attention that referees receive. This article seeks to explore whether the media treat referees negatively or project additional pressure on referees through their negative comments.

Media and Associated Pressure

As table 1 demonstrates, the total number of incidents and therefore the total number of times that the referee has been mentioned or discussed is relatively low, with an average of 13.4 incidents per match over the 20 matches. This translates to a total discussion time about the referee during a live match of 37.483 minutes, which when considered out of a total 1800 minutes available across the 20 matches, is a small number. During the total amount of time where the discussion focused on the referee (37.483 minutes) there were instances where the referee was discussed at greater length, with the greatest amount of time attributed to one incident being 5.63 minutes. There were also much shorter passages than this, and the least amount of time attributed to one incident in a match was 11 seconds.

Table 1 near here.

These statistics demonstrate a lack of focus of the media upon the referee across the 20 live matches. This is unexpected, particularly when considered in the light of previous literature which asserts that the media are the primary source of pressure for the modern referee. The notational analysis conducted in this research demonstrates that the live broadcasts do not support this claim. More specifically, the media do not spend as much time as previously thought discussing the referee. This is considered further through the interview comments and the number of positive, negative, neutral and questioning comments that are made by the commentators and pundits.

Media Discussion of Referee Performance

The interview responses confirm that the media are general positive about the standards and quality of refereeing in the English Premier League. There is an acceptance that mistakes can and will be made, but that referees are trying to do their best under difficult circumstances. The notational analysis, and comments recorded during live broadcasts, also support the assertion that the media are understanding of the job and role of the referee (see table 2).

Table 2 near here.

There were a larger number of neutral comments across the 20 live matches (113 incidents, equating to 41.85% of the total comments). Many of these comments about referee performance were neutral, factual statements such as, "Foul. Carroll wanted a free kick and then he got it after a foul from Chiriches". In these statements the commentators and pundits offered no positive, negative or questioning comments, merely stating what had occurred and the decision that had been given. The positive comments were the second largest grouping (25.56%). These comments often supported a decision given by the referee or the approach that the referee had taken in a specific situation. For example comments such as, "it looks as though he was brought down, but the referee rightly waved play on", were assigned a positive category, as the commentator or pundit supported the referees' decision.

The third category was that of the commentator or pundit questioning a decision or action by the referee. This category had 59 comments in the live matches and was 21.85% of the total percentage of responses. An example of a questioning comment was "...play on and did that strike the hand of Oviedo? It's hit him on the hand, i'm not sure if he is in the box, occasionally you see it given...would only have been a free kick as it was outside the box." The comment asks questions regarding the judgement of the referee but does not criticise the decision or comment negatively, or the action taken by

the official. The 'negative' comment category was attributable to 29 comments across the 20 live matches equating to 10.74% of the total number of comments in the live matches. These comments were typically more critical than those in the 'questioning' category and statements such as, "foul and free kick against Davies. He's gone down a bit easy, once again Swansea fans are livid. He missed the ball and I think you should expect the referee to give a free kick in that situation" or "goal kick, and we see there, the referee has got that one wrong", were assigned to the 'negative' category. These comments are openly critical of a decision that the referee has taken, although the 'negative' category was the least number of comments that the commentator or pundit made during the live matches.

Post game analysis and summary was more critical of referee performances. However, these negative comments were reserved for an error which was perceived to have affected the outcome of the game. There were other comments that were dismissive of the culture of football in England, also implicating referees in this culture. For example, one particular comment in a match involving Liverpool related to a penalty decision that the referee did not give, stating that referees, "...don't give that in first half. Don't get them, not at Anfield." Comments such as this serve to reinforce stereotypical and historical beliefs that there is some sort of conspiracy that supports the 'big' clubs in the Premier League in England, something which research on the reduction in home advantage since World War II contests⁴⁴. This type of comment can also be considered to increase the pressure on referees when they officiate at the largest stadiums if they are aware of the comments.

Pressure created by the Media

There is a belief that the pressure referees are under is attributable mainly to the media⁴⁵ and that this pressure has been increasing with the introduction and development

of technology within the televised media that cover live football matches. There is an undoubted increase in the amount of live football and therefore, as a consequence, there is more focus on the referee and more debate around the decisions that these referees make.

Those in the media admit that the referee can be a staple constituent of debate, and that referees' performances have been something that the media has increasingly focused on as part of the changing nature of televised football. Despite this focus, there is also the acceptance that referees can make mistakes:

“They come under real scrutiny because of television, because there are so many more cameras, so many more television angles, so many more television programmes examining every detail, every decision and occasionally, they are human just like footballers, they get things wrong, strikers miss open goals, goalkeepers let the ball go through their legs, referees sometimes get things wrong”
(Christian)

The increased exposure of referees is something that has naturally occurred as the game has evolved, although this does not necessarily mean that the media are overly critical of refereeing and refereeing performances per se. The notational analysis information suggests that, in fact, referees are discussed less often and for less time than one would suppose (see Table 1), and members of the media believe the pressure that referees are subjected to is not commensurate with the role and function that they provide during a football match. There is some belief within the media that referees actually compare very favourably with players and managers in terms of the errors made during matches:

“The pressure that is on referees, I think is completely out of proportion, the focus, the amount of time that is spent discussing refereeing, is completely out of proportion to their real significance in the game. Yes a sending off is an important thing, yes a penalty might or might not be a penalty but you show me the day when

a referee makes more mistakes than any player out on the pitch. Every player, the star player, the best player on any given day, will make five times as many mistakes as the referee does”

(Charlie)

Charlie does not debate the fact that referees make important decisions or that these decisions can be central to the match they are officiating. However, Charlie contextualises this by identifying the errors that players can make. There is an acceptance within the media that refereeing is a difficult job, and that referees do make mistakes, but they are ‘honest’ mistakes, and that referee’s performances generally are very good.

The comments made by commentators and pundits during a live match can also contribute to the pressure that referees are under. Despite the limited number of critical comments during the live broadcasts, and the fact that there are more positive comments, there are still critical comments during a match and more particularly in the post match analysis. If an error is committed, or is believed to have been committed by the referee, there is naturally going to be some criticism of the decision. However, it is the type of criticism and the nature of this criticism that is applicable here. Even when comments are positive they can be implicit rather than explicit and a number of ‘positive’ comments were what could be termed as ‘backhanded comments’. During the match a comment such as, “the referee takes further action for that earlier challenge, not a lot of contact but he did dive in and that is enough for referees these days” is both positive because the official is deemed to have arrived at the correct decision but also disparaging in a wider sense because of how referees officiate ‘these days’.

There are also negative comments made during the live match concerning the referee which are difficult to quantify, prove or measure. For example, upon a handball incident the referee judged that handball had occurred but was criticised for how this

decision was achieved, “handball given, on the call of the crowd pretty much”. It is impossible to prove this statement and there is also no mention of whether the referee actually gave the correct decision, merely the perceived influence of the crowd upon the decision. Crowd reaction was also cited on other occasions as something which further influenced the decision making of referees, “foul and a yellow card for his trouble. He hardly touches him. I think he’s [the referee] going off the crowds booing and reactions... Not really justified for me.” These type of comments can increase the pressure on referees, and can influence the opinion of supporters that are watching these broadcasts. The regularity of these comments was not as often as previous research has predicted and during the interview process members of the media stated that they did not want to hear from the referee or referees organisations because it means that the official has had a good game. A common complaint from the media is that referees are not permitted to talk to them after the match to clarify decisions, and members of the media believe that if this was allowed it would alleviate some of the pressure on the referees:

“...we ask after there is any type of incident, we don’t want to talk to the referee at all because that means he’s had a cracking game. But any single time, we request the referee and any single time we get told no. Now, if he’s come out, just in front of the cameras, we are not going to roast him, it’s not our way of doing things, we will ask a question, “Can you explain that decision?” Done, there, done.”

(Charles)

Referees have spoken to the media in England after a match during the Premier League era, although this was phased out during the 2002-2003 season. Charles implies that if referees did converse with the media more often then controversial incidents that the media want to discuss would be dealt with quickly after a match and this would, in turn, reduce any perceived pressure that referees are under.

Is the Media negative about referees?

The notational analysis demonstrates that the media are not overly negative towards referees. Most of the comments made during the 20 live matches were neutral (41.85%) with positive (25.56%), questioning (21.85%) and negative (10.74%) comments following the larger neutral comment section. Interview respondents were understanding of the challenges faced by referees and this is reflected in their responses and where critical comments are employed they are usually related to referees' decision making. Chris believes that the move to professional referees in the Premier League has generally been a positive step, but that it is naïve to think that this would mean the eradication of referee error, "professionalism...I think has been a good thing...anyone who believes beforehand that turning referees professional would rule out all mistakes was in cloud cuckoo land because professional or amateur they are human beings" (Chris). Also discussing the concept of professional referees, Colin believes that this professionalization has demonstrated considerable and measureable benefits in terms of referee preparation, performance and player management, "...the standard of fitness appears to be quite excellent. The standard of communication between referees and players has never been better...the cultural gap between referees and players appear to be narrowing" (Colin).

Despite this supportive narrative directed towards referees there is also an understanding that referees are in an unenviable position. Charlie argues that there will always be tension surrounding referees because authorities within football are demanding consistency from the match officials and when this uniformity is not perceived to have occurred referees are the obvious target, particularly if these decisions are believed to have affected the outcome of a match:

“...there is always a tension between the rules and the guy who has got to interpret those rules in a specific set of circumstances...managers and everybody whinge about consistency and if you want consistency that means that whatever the circumstances in the game, it must be the same punishment for the same crime on every occasion...I don't think refereeing as ever been quite as difficult as it is at the moment. Its a hard job being a referee.”

(Charlie)

Interview respondents are generally empathetic and take into account the changing nature of the game and the referee within this arrangement. Despite this understanding, interview respondents in the media believe that referees are still sceptical of the relationship that they have with the media, “...if he gets it wrong, he gets it wrong and it will happen, but I just think everybody needs to be open and honest about the whole thing. There is still a very much, them and us situation” (Clive). Christian elaborates further on the relationship between referees and the media and is clear about the issues that referees face if they are perceived to have made an error during a match, “...they've got it wrong, they've cost them the title or the FA Cup final appearance or something, or whatever it might be, they are going to get peppered by the press, peppered by the managers, it's highlighted in the media, television, radio, newspapers, supporters go for it and it just gets completely out of control” (Christian).

Christian, whilst also accepting that the media will focus on the referee after an error or mistake, also implicates others in this situation. Christian argues that, alongside the media, managers also have a part to play when referees are accused of an error. This attention on referees is not a new phenomenon. The 1932 FA Cup final between Newcastle and Arsenal ended with Newcastle winning the match 2-1, as a result of a contentious incident which led to the referee being questioned, and the decision being investigated and discussed in the national newspapers at the time (figures 2 and 3). The winning goal was the subject of controversy over whether the ball had gone out of play

prior to the goal being scored. Newspapers examined the video stills from various angles in the days following the match, in order to attempt to determine whether the referee, W.P. Harper, had been correct to award the goal.

As technology has advanced during the twentieth century there are further examples of refereeing decisions being subjected to scrutiny by the media. In 1970, for example, there were calls for the abolition of television replays by the IFAB, as it was deemed that these slow motion replays served to question the referees' authority as did the commentaries that accompanied these "play-backs" (IFAB minutes, 27/06/1970). That these are not recent issues, is confirmed by Craig, "...everyone is talking about refereeing but they have always talked about referees but I think more now than ever, they have become a real target for vilification and I personally don't like it" (Craig). This leads to the question of whether media attention has increased or merely the nature of this attention, which Craig describes as "vilification". There is also the view that referees are seen as fair game if they make an error, and that it is the media's responsibility to comment on both positive and negative decisions, "...we get what they [referees] try and do, but we have to look at mistakes and the consequences of those mistakes...we will call a good decision as much as a bad decision and there is no agenda there to nail referees" (Callum).

Figure 2 near here.

Figure 3 near here.

Conclusion

This article has considered the role of the media in Association Football, with particular reference to the media perception of referees. The media and sport are inextricably intertwined, they have developed and evolved together and football has been central to the expansion of this relationship. Football matches and their outcomes

are a staple constituent of both televised and print media outlets and refereeing decisions are a part of the in-game and post match analysis of this coverage. Previous research and common conception of the referee/media relationship is that of a relationship that produces pressure on the referee, with referees given little right to reply due to the directives they work under when dealing with the media.

This article has discovered that the pressure on referees from the media is not as pronounced as previous believed. The notational analysis of the 20 live matches from the 2013-2014 season shows that the live commentary produced mostly neutral comments about the referee (41.85%), followed by positive comments with negative comments only accounting for 10.74% of the total comments. These percentages confirm and support the interview responses. Members of the broadcast media are empathetic towards the role of the referee and the challenges that referees face in the modern game of Association Football.

The post-game analysis was more critical of refereeing decisions, whereas the in-game analysis was more favourable towards the referees. There were still comments and analysis when the referee was perceived to have made an error, and this is to be expected to some degree given the role and purpose of the media in sport. There is pressure from the media, although an argument can be constructed to suggest that much of the pressure from the media is 'perceived' by referees and those within refereeing and even the media themselves in some cases. Because this coverage is not as negative as previously documented, as a consequence, the pressure on referees from the media is not as significant as previously accepted.

Comments during the interview process argued that the pressure on referees is not acceptable and is out of proportion to their role within the game. Members of the media commented that they believe refereeing is of a generally high standard in the

Premier League in England and any errors that are made are a part of the game, just as players or managers making errors are a part of the game. In light of the findings of this research one recommendation is that there is a renewed and greater increased discussion with both refereeing organisations such as the Professional Game Match Officials Limited (PGMOL) the Football Association and the written and broadcast media. If referees perceive that they are constantly scrutinised, and negatively portrayed by the media, this research has found that this is not the case. Therefore, the ‘pressure’ that referees believe that they are under is not an accurate reflection of the current environment. This perception of pressure could lead to errors in performance, greater referee tension before matches and concerns over making incorrect decisions. If there is to be an improvement in the relationship between referees and the media there are a number of discussions required, as well as a greater degree of understanding, particularly from those within refereeing to ensure that the reduced pressure identified here is communicated.

Notes

¹ Smart, *The Sports Star*, 66.

² Goldlust, *Sport as Entertainment*, 41.

³ Jarvie, *Sport, Culture and Society*, 136.

⁴ Cahsmore, *Making Sense of Sports*, 323.

⁵ Murray, *Football. A History*, 30.

⁶ Helland, *Changing Sports*, 108.

⁷ Murray, *Football. A History*, 30.

⁸ Horne, Tomlinson and Whannel, *Understanding Sport*, 162.

⁹ Mason, *Sport in Britain*, 49.

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- ¹⁰ Nicholson, *Sport and the Media*, 21.
- ¹¹ Haynes, *A pageant*, 211.
- ¹² Helland, *Changing Sports*, 109.
- ¹³ Whannel, *Culture*, 71.
- ¹⁴ Taylor, *The Association Game*, 192.
- ¹⁵ Wagg, *The Football World*, 21; Horne, Tomlinson and Whannel, *Understanding Sport*, 44.
- ¹⁶ Boyle and Haynes, *Football*, 16.
- ¹⁷ Whannel, *Culture*, 72.
- ¹⁸ Andrews, *Sport*, 242.
- ¹⁹ Nauright and Ramfjord, *Who owns England's Game?*, 431.
- ²⁰ Williams, *The Local*, 387.
- ²¹ Hamil and Walters, *Financial Performance*, 358.
- ²² Nauright, *Global Games*, 1334.
- ²³ Rowe, *Sport, Culture*, 32.
- ²⁴ Coakley and Pike, *Sports in Society*, 438.
- ²⁵ Law, Harvey and Kemp, *The Global*, 281.
- ²⁶ Colwell, *The 'Letter'*, 209.
- ²⁷ Colwell, *Stalking Referees*, para. 1.
- ²⁸ Halsey, *'Travesties of Justice'*, 68-69.
- ²⁹ Buraimo, Forrest and Simmons, *The Twelfth Man?*, 432.
- ³⁰ Holt, *The Discourse*, 100.
- ³¹ Colwell, "Public Enemy", para 1-5.
- ³² Ibid., para 5.
- ³³ Schutt, *Investigating the Social World*, 173; Byrne, *Qualitative Interviewing*, 199.
- ³⁴ Carling, Williams and Reilly, *Handbook*, 3.
- ³⁵ Hughes and Franks, *The Notational Analysis*, 1.
- ³⁶ Hughes & Franks, *Notational Analysis of Sport*.

³⁷ Carling, Williams and Reilly, *Handbook*, 3; Hughes and Bartlett, *What is performance analysis?*, 9-10.

³⁸ Biddle et al., *Research Methods*, 795.

³⁹ Sparkes, *Writing People*.

⁴⁰ Faulkner and Sparkes, *Exercise as Therapy*.

⁴¹ Murphy, Dunning and Williams, *Soccer Crowd Disorder*, 645.

⁴² Colwell, *'The Letter'*.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Nevill, Webb and Watts, *Improved Training*.

⁴⁵ Buraimo Forrest and Simmons, *The Twelfth Man?*; Colwell, *Stalking Referees*; Colwell, *The 'Letter'*; Colwell, *"Public Enemy"*.

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