

CHALLENGES FACED BY SPORTS NEWS JOURNALISTS IN CHINA'S NEW MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

In the context of China's rapidly evolving new media environment, sports journalism is undergoing significant transformation. Platforms such as Douyin, WeChat, and Weibo have reshaped how sports news is produced, distributed, and consumed, creating new demands for speed, engagement, and digital fluency. This study investigates the major professional challenges faced by Chinese sports journalists in adapting to this environment. Using a qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 experienced journalists across diverse digital outlets. Thematic analysis identified five interrelated challenges: timeliness and accuracy, credibility and trustworthiness, economic pressures and resource constraints, balancing niche and mainstream content, and digital content production and innovation. These challenges reflect broader tensions between journalistic values and the algorithmic, commercial, and institutional forces that define today's new media landscape. The study highlights the structural marginalization of niche sports content and adds new perspectives to existing scholarship on platformization, digital labor, and media professionalism in non-Western contexts. Future research could incorporate regional comparisons or audience perspectives to further examine how credibility, visibility, and content diversity are shaped by evolving journalist-platform dynamics.

Keywords: China, Journalistic challenges, New media platforms, Sports news reporting.

Cabaran yang Dihadapi oleh Wartawan Berita Sukan dalam Persekitaran Media Baharu di China

Abstrak

Dalam konteks persekitaran media baharu China yang berkembang pesat, kewartawanan sukan sedang mengalami transformasi yang ketara. Platform seperti Douyin, WeChat, dan Weibo telah mengubah cara berita sukan dihasilkan, diedarkan, dan digunakan, sekaligus mewujudkan tuntutan baharu terhadap kepantasan, penglibatan, dan kecekapan digital. Kajian ini meneliti cabaran profesional utama yang dihadapi oleh wartawan sukan China dalam menyesuaikan diri dengan persekitaran tersebut. Dengan menggunakan reka bentuk penyelidikan kualitatif, temu bual separa berstruktur telah dijalankan dengan 20 wartawan berpengalaman dari pelbagai saluran digital. Analisis tematik mengenal pasti lima cabaran yang saling berkaitan: ketepatan masa dan ketepatan maklumat, kredibiliti dan kebolehpercayaan, tekanan ekonomi dan kekangan sumber, keseimbangan antara kandungan niche dan arus perdana, serta penghasilan dan inovasi kandungan digital. Cabaran-cabaran ini mencerminkan ketegangan yang lebih luas antara nilai kewartawanan dengan kuasa algoritma, komersial, dan institusi yang mentakrifkan landskap media baharu masa kini. Kajian ini menyoroti peminggiran struktur terhadap kandungan sukan niche dan menambah perspektif baharu kepada kesedaran sedia ada mengenai platformisasi, buruh digital, dan profesionalisme media dalam konteks bukan Barat. Penyelidikan masa depan boleh menggabungkan perbandingan serantau atau perspektif khalayak untuk meneliti dengan lebih mendalam bagaimana kredibiliti, keterlihatan, dan kepelbagaian kandungan dibentuk oleh dinamika wartawan-platform yang sentiasa berubah.

Kata Kunci: China, Cabaran kewartawanan, Platform media baharu, Wartawan sukan, Pelaporan berita sukan.

Introduction

Sports occupy a prominent position in both global and national cultures, serving not only as a source of entertainment but also as a vehicle for cultural expression, national identity, and social interaction (Rowe, 2019; Xin & Kunzmann, 2020). In China, the increasing visibility of both international and domestic sporting events, such as the Olympic Games and national football leagues, has intensified public demand for sports coverage that is timely, immersive, and credible. Once limited to traditional outlets like newspapers and television, sports journalism now

plays a more dynamic role in shaping public discourse and fostering shared emotional experiences.

Over the past decade, the rapid development of digital media technologies has profoundly reshaped the landscape of sports journalism. New media platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin have transformed how news is produced, distributed, and consumed, introducing a media environment defined by speed, interactivity, and algorithmic visibility. These platforms have replaced the traditional one-way flow of communication with more immediate and participatory forms of engagement, enabling audiences to share, comment on, and generate content in real time. As a result, sports journalists are now expected to operate across multiple platforms, manage continuous updates, and respond promptly to audience feedback while upholding professional credibility. WeChat serves as an integrated platform for messaging, news feeds, and targeted notifications, while Weibo facilitates the rapid dissemination of trending topics, real-time commentary, and live reporting (Pang et al., 2022). Douyin, widely recognized internationally as TikTok, has emerged as a major outlet for short-form sports coverage, particularly popular among younger audiences (Xia, 2023).

In modern society, the media environment is undergoing profound changes, particularly due to the rapid advancement of digital technology and the Internet. The rise of online media and mobile platforms has significantly weakened traditional print media's position in sports reporting, making it increasingly disadvantaged in terms of timeliness and spatial immediacy (Hutchins & Boyle, 2020). While digital platforms offer enhanced user experiences through real-time updates and interactive content, they also introduce new difficulties for journalists who must strive to uphold professional standards under intensifying pressure.

Some scholars have identified a range of challenges that sports journalists may face in digital environments, including time pressures, the proliferation of user-generated content, and growing technological demands. One frequently cited concern is the pressure to prioritize speed over accuracy, especially during live reporting or breaking news. The logic of real-time publishing, reinforced by the attention economy of social media, compresses news cycles and often bypasses traditional editorial safeguards. Journalists working under these conditions may have limited time for fact-checking and verification, increasing the risk of errors.

Another issue observed by researchers involves the growing influence of user-generated content (UGC), which can blur the boundary between

professional and amateur journalism. Platforms such as Weibo and Douyin empower fans, influencers, and non-professional commentators to create live updates, personal analyses, and event coverage that compete directly with the work of trained journalists. While UGC can enrich the diversity of perspectives, it also contributes to the spread of unverified and sensational content, potentially undermining the credibility of traditional news outlets (Boyle, 2020; Hutchins & Boyle, 2020). This convergence of professional and amateur reporting complicates journalistic authority, especially when audiences treat all sources as equally valid (Tandoc & Vos, 2016).

In addition, scholars have noted that the integration of artificial intelligence, data analytics, and livestreaming tools introduces new demands on journalists' technical proficiency. These digital innovations open up creative storytelling possibilities but also require substantial training, infrastructure, and institutional support. In practice, not all journalists have equal access to these resources, leading to disparities in production quality and professional development (da Silva, 2023). In China, these issues are compounded by platform-specific content governance, shifting audience expectations, and regulatory frameworks that shape media workflows and editorial priorities (Kunz & Santomier, 2019).

Furthermore, the role of sports journalists is evolving in ways that challenge their professional identity. Increasingly, they are expected not only to report but also to act as entertainers, influencers, and content strategists. The pressure to maintain personal visibility across platforms and to drive engagement through metrics such as clicks and shares often conflicts with journalistic values like neutrality, depth, and verification. As Perreault and Bell (2022) observe, digital sports journalists today are increasingly caught between professional ideals and platform-driven visibility imperatives, highlighting the growing tension between ethical standards and the algorithmic demands of digital platforms.

Problem Statement

Although digital transformation has been widely recognized as reshaping sports journalism worldwide, limited empirical work has examined its impact within China's unique media landscape. Studies of online sports reporting in Europe, North America, and Australia have extensively documented pressures such as technological disruption, audience fragmentation, and commercial imperatives (Boyle, 2020; Hutchins &

Boyle, 2020; Perreault & Bell, 2022). However, there is limited empirical research examining how these dynamics manifest in China's unique media environment, which is shaped by distinct governance structures, platform regulations, and audience behaviors (Kunz & Santomier, 2019; Xin & Kunzmann, 2020). This gap makes it unclear whether theories developed in Western journalism studies adequately capture the realities of Chinese sports journalists.

Moreover, although Chinese media scholarship has examined topics such as digital governance, censorship, and the influence of platforms like WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin (Pang et al., 2022; Xia, 2023), relatively little attention has been paid to the professional challenges faced by frontline sports journalists. Specifically, there is insufficient exploration of how they navigate tensions between speed and accuracy, professional standards and user-generated content, or journalistic autonomy and platform algorithms.

This gap is particularly significant given that sports journalism in China plays an important role in shaping national identity, public discourse, and cultural narratives, especially during high-profile international events such as the Olympic Games (Rowe, 2019). By investigating the professional realities of sports journalists, this study contributes to global comparative discussions on journalism in the digital age, providing insights into how platform-driven pressures intersect with China's regulatory and cultural contexts (Zhang, 2023). Finally, the findings have practical implications: understanding the challenges faced by sports journalists can inform training, institutional support, and policy development aimed at strengthening journalistic standards in an era where credibility and trust are increasingly contested.

Therefore, this study seeks to address the following central research question:

What are the major challenges encountered by sports news journalists in China within the new media environment?

By answering this question, the research aims to fill an important gap in the literature, advancing both theoretical knowledge and practical strategies for sustaining professional journalism in China's rapidly evolving digital ecosystem.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the professional challenges faced by sports journalists in China's dynamic new media environment. A qualitative approach was chosen for its ability to capture the complexity of journalists' lived experiences and professional judgments within a rapidly changing digital ecosystem (Hennink et al., 2020). Semi-structured interviews were used to gather rich, in-depth narratives that reflect how journalists adapt to platform-driven pressures and institutional expectations.

A total of 20 sports journalists, labeled P1 to P20, currently working on major Chinese digital platforms (Douyin, WeChat, and Weibo), were recruited as informants. These platforms were selected for their prominent influence on contemporary sports journalism in China (Plantin & De Seta, 2019). Informants were selected through non-probability sampling based on a set of clearly defined inclusion criteria.

To ensure the relevance and richness of the data, informants were required to meet four conditions. First, they had to be currently employed as sports journalists with a primary focus on the coverage of sports events or sports-related content. Second, they were required to have at least two years of experience using one or more of the selected platforms as core tools for content creation, dissemination, or audience engagement. Third, each journalist needed to possess a minimum of five years of professional experience in the sports journalism industry to ensure reflective insight. Finally, the sample was diversified across media types, including state-owned, commercial, and digital-native outlets, to capture a broad range of institutional contexts. This diversity allowed for the inclusion of perspectives shaped by different newsroom environments, from policy-driven editorial logics to market-oriented content strategies (Holt et al., 2019; Strömbäck et al., 2020).

Initial outreach was conducted via email. Each potential participant received an invitation letter along with a consent form explaining the study's aims, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality safeguards in place. Once informed consent was obtained, interviews were scheduled based on informants' availability. All interviews were conducted through Tencent Meeting, a widely used video conferencing platform in China. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes each and followed a semi-structured protocol adapted from Rowe (2019) and Hutchins (2019). The protocol included open-ended questions exploring informants' professional backgrounds and their reflections on the

evolving challenges encountered in the field of sports journalism. All interviews were audio-recorded with informants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. To ensure anonymity and data security, all identifiable information was removed from the transcripts, and the data were securely stored by the researcher. Ethical standards were strictly maintained throughout the research process.

Data analysis was conducted using the thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which provides a structured yet adaptable approach for identifying and interpreting patterns within qualitative data. The analysis followed six iterative phases: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of candidate themes, review and refinement of themes, definition and naming of themes, and final report production. This process enabled a deep engagement with the dataset and supported the development of thematically grounded insights into how sports journalists experience and respond to the challenges associated with real-time, platform-driven reporting in China's new media landscape.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the empirical findings derived from in-depth interviews with twenty sports journalists. The analysis reveals a range of challenges experienced in the context of China's rapidly evolving digital media landscape. These findings are organized into key thematic categories that reflect both common patterns and individual nuances in participants' narratives. The below table summarizes the main themes and sub-themes, along with illustrative quotations from participants that capture the core concerns and experiences identified through the thematic analysis.

Table 1: Key Thematic Categories Based on Main Theme and Sub-Themes

Theme	Sub-theme	Frequency (n=20)	Illustrative Quote
Challenges in sports journalism	Timeliness and Accuracy	22	"I often work under tight deadlines, which means balancing speed and accuracy is difficult."
	Credibility and Trustworthiness	17	"It's getting harder for readers to tell what's real journalism and what's just a headline designed to grab clicks. Sometimes, I'm just not sure if I'm part of the problem."
	Economic Pressures and Resource Constraints	18	"If we don't attract enough viewers, there's no money to be made. A lot of times, we're too busy catering to the audience's needs to focus on producing in-depth content."
	Balancing Niche vs Mainstream Content	14	"To be honest, when we cover niche sports like ultimate frisbee, we need to tell engaging and meaningful stories to get audiences and sponsors to take them seriously."
	Digital Content Production and Innovation	16	"Now that video quality keeps improving, it's getting harder for content to stand out. I have to constantly try new approaches, like adding interactive elements or optimizing editing techniques, to grab the audience's attention."

Timeliness and Accuracy

One of the central challenges identified in the interviews is the persistent tension between timeliness and accuracy, a theme that defines the work of sports journalists in today's fast-paced digital environment. The

accelerated pace of content production demanded by platforms such as Douyin places journalists under considerable pressure to publish updates quickly, often before thorough verification is feasible. As one respondent noted, "I often work under tight deadlines, which means balancing speed and accuracy is difficult" (P1). This sentiment was echoed by others: "In today's short video era, balancing time pressure with delivering quality content is a tough challenge" (P3); "I often have to publish an initial update fast, but it's hard to ensure all information is accurate in such a short time frame" (P19). These testimonies reflect a wider structural dilemma in contemporary journalism, where the need for immediacy frequently undermines the capacity for in-depth reporting and factual reliability. This phenomenon aligns with what Yang (2020) describes as the "speed-depth paradox," in which the demand for rapid dissemination often compromises the quality of journalistic output.

This tension becomes particularly acute during breaking news events, where information is frequently incomplete or still developing. In such cases, journalists must make difficult editorial decisions, weighing the risks associated with delaying publication against the potential consequences of publishing unverified content. As one participant explained, "For breaking news, I try to verify the details with at least two sources, but the need to post quickly often complicates this" (P8). This challenge is well documented in existing literature. Gong (2025) argues that the increasing acceleration of news cycles diminishes the time available for rigorous fact-checking, while Yan and Wang (2021) highlight the growing reliance on provisional updates as a compromise between speed and accuracy.

Moreover, the competitive nature of the digital media environment adds further complexity to this issue. Respondents frequently emphasized how platform algorithms and audience expectations intensify the pressure to publish quickly. "The speed of delivery has become more important than the depth of the content," remarked P20, emphasizing how engagement metrics often outweigh considerations of content quality. Similarly, P17 commented, "The pressure is not just about being fast but also about being engaging. If you're not quick, someone else will take the audience away." Scholars such as Molyneux and Coddington (2020) have pointed out that this logic of visibility, driven by clicks, shares, and algorithmic promotion, has led newsrooms to prioritize immediacy and virality, often at the expense of journalistic quality and credibility.

Nevertheless, many journalists interviewed for this study expressed a continued commitment to accuracy and ethical reporting. "In our foundation-driven reporting, we prioritize accuracy and ethical responsibility over speed," stated P16, underscoring that verified information remains a core professional value. However, several also acknowledged the difficulty of upholding these standards consistently in practice. As P12 noted, "The constant demand for fast updates often limits our ability to ensure that every detail is correct." This ongoing negotiation between the urgency to publish and the responsibility to verify illustrates a defining challenge of sports journalism in the new media environment. As Shi (2021) aptly observes, the conflict between accuracy and urgency is not merely circumstantial; it is embedded in the very structure of digital news production today.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

Another central challenge facing sports journalists in China's new media landscape is the increasing difficulty of maintaining credibility and trustworthiness in an environment dominated by click-driven content strategies. As platforms such as Weibo, Douyin, and personal public accounts prioritize immediacy, engagement, and algorithmic visibility, journalists are frequently caught between the demands of digital attention economies and the ethical principles of responsible reporting. This tension compromises journalistic credibility in both subtle and overt ways. As one respondent remarked, "It's getting harder for readers to tell what's real journalism and what's just a headline designed to grab clicks" (P1). The widespread use of sensationalized headlines and clickbait may increase traffic, but they often mislead audiences and damage long-term trust. Another journalist noted, "You see these crazy headlines everywhere... but then you click, and it's about something completely different" (P3). Although these tactics are effective in attracting viewers, they simultaneously contribute to growing audience cynicism and the broader erosion of the perceived legitimacy of sports journalism.

Beyond exaggeration, the fabrication of content for the sake of engagement represents a deeper and more troubling violation of professional standards. Several interviewees pointed to the deliberate creation of false stories, particularly regarding high-profile athletes or dramatic locker-room incidents. "People just make stuff up for the clicks," said P16, referencing fabricated reports of injuries or interpersonal conflicts. In other cases, journalists reuse outdated stories with modified timestamps to make them appear current, a practice that blurs the line between misinformation and manipulation (P2). These trends align with

the findings of Gong (2025), who warns that the commercial logic underlying platform journalism incentivizes shortcuts and compromises that erode journalistic integrity from within.

The growing emphasis on entertainment over substance presents significant challenges for journalists seeking to maintain professional standards. As one respondent observed, "Sports gossip and celebrity drama get way more attention than actual sports stories" (P18). This shift in content priorities diverts attention from analytical reporting to superficial narratives aimed at amusement. Li (2020) contends that such trends compromise the integrity of sports journalism by transforming reporters into entertainers rather than objective observers. Compounding this problem is the increasing reliance on unverified social media content. "Many young reporters have never met the athletes they write about... they write based on rumors," noted P7, underscoring how secondhand information further erodes journalistic accuracy and authority.

These content-level issues are mirrored by audience perceptions, which reveal a growing skepticism toward digital news sources. "People don't trust the new sources... they think it's all just entertainment," said P6, illustrating the erosion of public confidence in journalistic rigor. Park et al. (2024) argue that the algorithmic and commercial logic of digital platforms has diluted journalism's core mission to inform. As fragmented, sensational content proliferates, audiences are increasingly disengaging from news consumption. This creates a tension where journalists must navigate the competing demands of immediacy and depth, while working to restore public trust.

In light of these factors, preserving credibility and trust has become one of the most pressing challenges for sports journalists operating in China's digital media environment. Practices such as clickbait, content fabrication, and framing stories solely for entertainment purposes may yield short-term engagement gains but ultimately undermine the foundational values of journalism. As P16 cautioned, "If you're constantly sacrificing accuracy for speed, you're eventually going to lose the trust of your audience." Addressing this challenge will require a renewed commitment to ethical standards, editorial transparency, and the reaffirmation of journalism's social responsibility in a rapidly evolving media ecosystem.

Economic Pressures and Resource Constraints

A third major challenge frequently highlighted by sports journalists is the intensifying economic pressure and the persistent lack of resources, both of which significantly undermine the quality, depth, and independence of reporting. In privately operated media organizations, the imperative to generate high traffic and advertising revenue often overrides editorial decisions grounded in journalistic values. As one short-video journalist from Haibang Network commented, "If we don't attract enough viewers, there's no money to be made" (P1). This statement reflects a broader shift within the industry, where audience metrics such as views, clicks, and shares increasingly dictate content production priorities. Even in large-scale platforms, similar concerns prevail. A football editor at Tencent Sports noted, "Editors often have to make decisions based on what kind of content will generate the most clicks" (P2). These comments suggest that commercial imperatives have become deeply embedded in newsroom operations, encouraging a preference for sensational or surface-level content over in-depth or investigative reporting.

Although public and non-profit media outlets are less reliant on commercial traffic, they are not immune to financial limitations. A sports journalist from CGTN explained, "The budget is still limited... we have to choose only the most crucial stories" (P5), indicating that editorial scope is often narrowed due to constrained funding, especially when covering resource-intensive events such as international tournaments. Non-profit organizations face even greater financial uncertainty. A journalist affiliated with the Yao Foundation reported, "We rely heavily on small partnerships" (P16), pointing to the challenges of sustaining independent journalism under constant financial strain. This reliance on external funding can compromise editorial autonomy and create long-term vulnerabilities in content planning. The Digital News Report 2023 highlights that even publicly supported institutions often face resource disparities that affect not only the quantity but also the consistency and quality of their coverage (Newman et al., 2023).

Smaller and less established media outlets are particularly vulnerable within this economically competitive environment, not only because of reduced revenue channels but also due to long-standing disparities in access to professional infrastructure and human resources. Journalists from these organizations often operate with minimal editorial staff, outdated equipment, and limited funding for travel or investigative work. As P17 noted, "We have to cover everything remotely, and there's no

budget for field reporting.” Even larger outlets with more stable funding structures report constraints that inhibit the production of in-depth or long-form content. A documentary producer at Five Star Sports Media remarked, “We just have to make the most of the resources we have” (P9), pointing to how even ambitious editorial projects are shaped by budget ceilings and commercial imperatives. These limitations reduce journalistic flexibility and restrict the ability to pursue stories that fall outside of highly monetizable or high-traffic content zones.

These financial pressures have a direct impact not only on the types of stories selected but also on the framing and depth of coverage. As one participant put it, “The constant pressure to drive traffic often forces us to prioritize click-worthy topics over in-depth analysis” (P18). This observation underscores a systemic shift in editorial culture, where the logic of the marketplace increasingly takes precedence over the core values of journalism. Such a shift has serious implications for the credibility and professional identity of sports journalists. Shi (2021) warns that market-driven editorial strategies risk diluting journalistic standards and fostering an environment where sensationalism is rewarded over substance. Hutchins and Boyle (2020) further observe that economic and technological transformations are reshaping the institutional foundations of sports journalism, challenging long-standing professional norms and blurring the boundaries between editorial independence and commercial influence.

Balancing Niche vs Mainstream Content

A persistent challenge faced by sports journalists in China is navigating the structural tension between covering niche sports and meeting the commercial imperatives of mainstream-oriented platforms. While emerging disciplines such as ultimate frisbee, skateboarding, or local grassroots competitions present opportunities for innovation, community engagement, and cultural inclusion, they continue to be marginalized due to their limited visibility and weak monetization potential. “When we cover niche sports like ultimate frisbee, we need to tell engaging and meaningful stories to get audiences and sponsors to take them seriously,” explained P14, emphasizing the need for alternative storytelling formats that highlight human interest and cultural context rather than focusing solely on competitive outcomes. Despite employing creative strategies, such as aligning content with regional festivals, lifestyle themes, or local tourism initiatives, many journalists noted that such efforts frequently fall short in capturing sustained audience attention.

This editorial compromise is further shaped by the algorithmic logic and commercial design of dominant platforms. As P10 candidly stated, “We can’t afford to skip NBA or CBA... those are what get pushed by the platform.” High-traffic topics such as professional basketball or celebrity-driven stories are consistently prioritized by content recommendation systems, thereby crowding out lesser-known narratives. Under such conditions, niche reporting is often relegated to peripheral slots or bundled alongside more popular segments to maintain internal performance benchmarks. P8 described this internal dilemma: “If the views are low, it’s hard to justify the budget... eventually, we have to mix niche content with popular leagues just to keep things sustainable.” These constraints reveal how algorithmic preference can override editorial intent, reinforcing a cycle where media attention is unequally distributed.

Structural inequities become particularly visible in stories that, while socially or culturally significant, fail to align with prevailing platform trends. P19 recalled the limited reach of a documentary on female skateboarders in rural China, noting that “it struggled to gain traction” despite its unique perspective and social relevance. Similar cases illustrate what Schaetz et al. (2025) describe as the platformization of editorial values, in which content diversity is increasingly subordinated to algorithmic performance and audience metrics. As P16 observed, “There are so many grassroots or regional stories that never get told. If we don’t push them ourselves, they disappear entirely from public view.” This reflects a broader issue of editorial invisibility, wherein socially important yet non-commercial narratives are systematically excluded from the public sphere by platform-driven economies of attention.

In this context, the challenge of balancing niche and mainstream content is not simply a matter of journalistic preference or creative ambition; rather, it is a structural constraint shaped by commercialization, algorithmic governance, and fluctuating audience behavior. Prior studies (Li et al., 2021; Lu et al., 2021) affirm that this fragmented and performance-oriented logic forces journalists to oscillate between passion-driven storytelling and metrics-driven production cycles. The result is a narrowing of content diversity and a weakening of journalism’s representative function, as economically viable coverage increasingly overshadows editorial innovation in China’s digital sports media landscape.

Digital Content Production and Innovation

The rapid evolution of digital platforms has significantly reshaped the technical and creative demands of sports journalism, creating new challenges in content production and innovation. As media formats expand from traditional text to include short videos, livestreams, infographics, and interactive storytelling, journalists are expected to produce content that is not only factually accurate but also visually compelling and technologically up-to-date. As P17 explained, "Now that video quality keeps improving, it's getting harder for content to stand out." To meet these heightened expectations, some teams now incorporate features such as dynamic data feeds and bullet comments to increase audience engagement. However, such innovations often require constant technical learning and a high degree of creativity, making the production process both labor-intensive and cognitively demanding.

These pressures are further intensified by mobile-first consumption patterns, particularly on platforms like Douyin. Journalists are increasingly expected to tailor content specifically for mobile audiences, optimizing for vertical video formats, rapid pacing, and visual interactivity. As P4 noted, "Creating content for platforms like Douyin requires constant innovation. I have to learn new editing tools and make visuals mobile-optimized." Zhao et al. (2020) similarly observed that platform-specific technical adaptation has become a core competency, where audience engagement hinges less on journalistic insight and more on editing sophistication and visual rhythm.

Even traditional newsrooms must now adapt to this multimedia environment. Rather than simply publishing text-based reports, journalists are shifting toward visual storytelling modes that include GIFs, infographics, short videos, and animated explainers. As P7 described, "Reporting is no longer about one-way communication," especially when covering complex topics such as policy reforms or sports regulations. Dong (2021) interprets this as part of a broader redefinition of journalistic formats, where visual fluency increasingly outweighs narrative depth.

Real-time data integration further complicates digital production. Journalists must manage not only the technical aspects of syncing video with live statistics but also the ethical responsibility of ensuring accuracy and clarity. "I have to ensure the information is accurate without making the video look cluttered," said P19, describing how her team overlays CBA game footage with API-driven live data. Shang and Zhang (2021)

caution that while such immersive features enhance viewer engagement, they may also create confusion or ethical ambiguity if not carefully implemented.

The integration of advanced technologies such as AI-assisted editing, automatic subtitling, and content preloading has become increasingly common, especially in multilingual or real-time publishing scenarios. However, these tools are not without limitations. As P12 pointed out, "Journalists still need to intervene to ensure the content adheres to journalistic ethics," reinforcing the argument by Ji et al. (2020) that human oversight remains essential even in tech-assisted reporting environments.

Moreover, in a highly competitive digital ecosystem, the first few seconds of content have become strategically critical. Douyin's algorithm, for instance, favors motion, color contrast, and immediate visual stimuli to boost click-through rates. As P17 noted, his team frequently experiments with filters, transitions, and tightly structured story openings to capture audience attention. This pursuit of instant engagement often creates a creative tension between visual spectacle and journalistic clarity. While Zhu (2021) argues that innovation is essential for legacy outlets to maintain relevance, the speed and intensity of technological change risk prioritizing aesthetic appeal over substantive reporting.

In sum, digital innovation in sports journalism presents both opportunity and challenge. It enables new forms of storytelling and deeper audience interaction, but also demands a high degree of technical fluency, adaptability, and ethical judgment. As Chinese sports journalists strive to remain competitive and credible in an increasingly fragmented media environment, they must learn to balance experimentation with editorial discipline. This challenge is made all the more urgent by the ongoing convergence of media technologies, shifting platform logics, and evolving audience expectations.

Conclusion and Implications

This study examined the primary challenges faced by sports news journalists in China within the evolving digital media landscape, drawing upon insights from interviews with professionals working across platforms such as Douyin, WeChat, and Weibo. The findings reveal a complex web of interrelated pressures, including the tension between timeliness and accuracy, the erosion of credibility and trustworthiness due to sensationalized or unverified content, ongoing economic

pressures and resource constraints, the structural difficulty of balancing niche and mainstream content, and the mounting demands associated with digital content production and innovation. These challenges are embedded in a broader media environment shaped by algorithmic distribution, engagement-driven metrics, and financial imperatives. Despite these barriers, journalists continue to uphold professional standards by developing adaptive practices that reconcile speed with credibility and creativity with ethical responsibility.

One of the study's distinctive contributions lies in foregrounding a relatively underexplored issue in digital journalism: the imbalance between mainstream and niche sports coverage. While previous literature has extensively examined how algorithmic curation reinforces immediacy and personalization in news production (Zhang, 2020; Li, 2020), less attention has been paid to how these same algorithms systematically marginalize less commercially viable content.

On platforms such as Weibo and Douyin, content related to popular leagues like the NBA or CBA is consistently prioritized, whereas emerging or grassroots sports such as skateboarding or ultimate frisbee often struggle to gain traction due to lower engagement metrics. Prior research has suggested that this algorithmic favoritism distorts editorial priorities and narrows the diversity of stories represented in the media (Li et al., 2021; Lu et al., 2021). The findings of this study support these concerns by demonstrating how commercial imperatives and platform-driven visibility thresholds shape journalists' content strategies, often leading to the sidelining of less marketable but socially meaningful topics. In response, the study calls for both editorial initiatives and platform-level reforms that promote content plurality while resisting the tendency to equate journalistic value solely with algorithmic popularity.

Theoretically, this study enriches the body of literature on journalism in non-Western digital contexts by offering an empirically grounded, context-specific understanding of how Chinese sports journalists navigate a platform-governed media environment. Unlike prior research that focused on general or Western-centric models of digital journalism, this study identifies five structural tensions that shape sports reporting in China. It reveals how the logic of speed and visibility is embedded in editorial routines, often at the expense of verification and public trust. In doing so, the study contributes to broader debates on media professionalism, platformization, and journalistic autonomy within the Chinese media system.

Although this study offers valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge its methodological limitations. The sample, while diverse across media types, was purposively selected and relatively small, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could adopt mixed-method approaches, incorporate larger or more regionally varied samples, or include audience perspectives to better understand how credibility and trust are constructed within digital sports media ecosystems. Further inquiries might also examine how editorial autonomy is shaped by platform policies in different newsroom settings or explore how audiences perceive the boundaries between professional journalism and user-generated content. In doing so, researchers can contribute to a more holistic understanding of how digital innovation and participatory culture continue to reshape both the operational realities and the normative foundations of sports journalism in China and comparable media environments.

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Author's Declaration

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