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From Newsroom to Newsfeed

Journalistic Legitimacy in Modern Football Reporting

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how journalistic legitimacy is constructed, performed, and contested in the evolving landscape of digital sports journalism, with a particular focus on football transfer reporting. Through a comparative case study of two high-profile reporters - Fabrizio Romano, a platform-native influencer journalist, and Farzam Abolhosseini, a legacy-embedded Danish reporter - this study explores how credibility is negotiated when institutional routines and platform metrics collide.

Drawing on field theory (Rowe; Hutchins & Rowe; Boyle & Rowe) and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough; Carvalho), the project develops a layered analytical framework that links macro-level transformations in sports journalism to micro-level discursive strategies. The analysis is grounded in two data sources: a semi-structured, researcher-conducted interview with Farzam Abolhosseini and a long-form public interview with Fabrizio Romano, published by Rising Ballers. Both datasets are examined through a discourse-analytical lens, with particular attention to modality, interdiscursivity, metadiscourse, and legitimation.

The study finds that while both reporters operate in a hybrid media ecology, their legitimacy strategies differ significantly. Abolhosseini foregrounds verification, coherence, and institutional anchoring, positioning himself within the normative traditions of legacy journalism. His discourse emphasizes concrete sourcing, double-confirmation, and a clear boundary between journalism and entertainment. Romano, by contrast, constructs authority through visibility, speed, and brand consistency. His use of signature phrases ("Here we go"), high-certainty language, and metadiscursive framing cues exemplifies a platform-first model of journalism in which personal brand supersedes institutional backing.

The analysis reveals three key dimensions in which these logics diverge: (1) the foundations of journalistic legitimacy (institutional vs. personal branding), (2) platform performance (editorial coherence vs. algorithmic visibility), and (3) emotional labour (professional duty vs. audience-driven persona management). Despite these differences, both reporters demonstrate adaptive boundary work, selectively drawing from both legacy and influencer repertoires to maintain credibility.

This study contributes to the emerging literature on digital sports journalism by offering an insider-focused, comparative account of how legitimacy is discursively enacted in real time. It also challenges binary distinctions between “journalists” and “influencers,” showing instead that the boundary between the two is increasingly porous, negotiated through audience expectations, technological affordances, and professional self-understanding.

Ultimately, the thesis argues that sports journalism is undergoing not a wholesale replacement of institutional norms, but a complex realignment in which editorial authority and platform logic coexist, compete, and at times converge. This has implications not only for the profession's future, but for public trust in sports news more broadly. In concluding, the study reflects on the ethical and practical challenges facing journalists who must now operate simultaneously as reporters, curators, and brands in a platform-saturated news ecosystem.

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Introduction

Journalism's authority has long drawn strength from two intertwined foundations: the scarcity of publishing channels and the craft's own routines of verification. Printing presses, broadcast licences and, later, proprietary news sites created bottlenecks through which information had to pass, while layered editorial processes distinguished substantiated fact from rumour. In the past decade those foundations have been loosened - if not cracked outright - by social-media platforms that let any individual speak to vast audiences with a single tap. Visibility, velocity and an instantly recognisable voice have become currencies that can rival, and sometimes eclipse, institutional pedigree.

Few areas illustrate this redistribution of authority as vividly as professional football, especially the hyper-competitive market for player transfers. A transfer is the formal reassignment of a player's registration from one club to another, negotiated in private yet consumed in real time by global fan communities hungry for confirmation or denial. The information race that surrounds each move rewards whoever can publish first and persuasively, shrinking the interval between rumour and headline to minutes. Two contrasting journalistic careers capture that dynamic and serve as focal cases for this thesis.

Fabrizio Romano exemplifies the platform-native scooper. Working largely through X/Twitter, Instagram and YouTube, he has built an audience of more than 50 million followers. His three-word signal "Here we go!" functions as an informal seal of authenticity: when he posts it, supporters and newsrooms alike treat the deal as effectively done. Romano's primary newsroom is the personal feed, and his principal capital is the attention of a worldwide public.

Farzam Abolhosseini, by contrast, is senior football correspondent at Tipsbladet, one of Denmark's biggest football media outlets. Rooted in a legacy publication within a public-service media culture, he still relies on conventional beat practices, such as cultivating club sources, filing for print and web, but supplements them with a measured, increasingly strategic presence on social platforms. His career unfolds in a smaller market, yet one just as exposed to the gravitational pull of instantaneous, shareable news.

Bringing these two reporters into the same frame offers a rare lens on how journalistic legitimacy is being renegotiated as platform logics permeate sports news. The study analyses an

original, semi-structured interview with Abolhosseini and a recently published long-form interview with Romano, attending closely to the language each uses when describing sourcing, verification and independence. By foregrounding their own narratives, rather than inferring motives solely from their public output, the project aims to illuminate the shifting boundary between professional principle and entrepreneurial self-branding at a moment when newsroom tradition and platform visibility must be balanced day by day.

Although the inquiry cannot capture every contour of the ongoing media transformation, it offers the insider vantage point missing from current scholarship and thus sharpens our view of how two divergent professional pathways negotiate credibility under conditions of digital abundance. This perspective leads directly to the guiding research question set out below.

Problem Formulation

How do two prominent football-transfer reporters - one working primarily through social-media platforms and one attached to a legacy news organisation - construct and justify their journalistic legitimacy in a platform-driven news environment, and to what extent do their practices illuminate the relationship between institution-based and influencer-centred logics in contemporary sports journalism?

Literature Review

The scholarly conversation on digital sports journalism has evolved quickly in the past decade, yet it still revolves around a central puzzle: how authority travels when news moves from newsroom desks to personal feeds. Three recent studies supply the most convincing answers so far and, in doing so, set the agenda for what remains to be explained. Each explores a different plane of the same phenomenon, such as field structure, professional practice and personal performance, meaning that together they form a conceptual staircase on which the present thesis can stand.

Gregory Perreault and Travis Bell begin on the widest step. In "Towards a 'Digital' Sports Journalism: Field Theory, Changing Boundaries and Evolving Technologies," they combine forty-seven depth interviews with a Bourdieusian framework in order to redraw the profession's map. Their respondents consist of reporters who self-identify as digital, and they do not describe club-run channels as competitors, but as partners that share audience and economic capital (Perreault & Bell, 2022, p. 2). That re-alignment, the authors argue, weakens the traditional division between newsroom incumbents and external publicists because economic rewards now follow visibility rather than institutional affiliation (Perreault & Bell, 2022, p. 23). Methodologically, the article is valuable for its thick, qualitative evidence; conceptually, it supplies four tools - field, doxa, habitus and capital - that allow subsequent scholars to track the subtle ways power migrates once digital platforms dominate distribution. Its limitation lies in its scope: by design, it treats reporters as a bloc and therefore offers little sense of how individual actors negotiate the new landscape moment to moment.

That negotiation is exactly what Simon McEnnis uncovers one level down the staircase. "There He Goes: The Influencer–Sports Journalism of Fabrizio Romano on Twitter and Its Implications for Professionalism" follows Romano throughout one month of the European transfer window and hand-codes every tweet he posted in that period. The analysis reveals that Romano's feed is dominated by plainly worded, time-stamped transfer confirmations rather than by lifestyle vignettes or provocative opinion pieces (McEnnis, 2023, p. 430). In other words, he simulates the genre of a traditional news wire while operating entirely within the affordances of a social platform. By the end of the window he commands an audience that would rival many European newspapers - more than thirteen million followers (at the time of McEnnis' publication. As of today, Romano has more than 24 million followers) on X alone (McEnnis,

2023, p. 431), which has been achieved without newsroom backing or institutional accreditation. McEnnis's article thus concretises Perreault and Bell's claim that capital now accrues outside the newsroom; it also raises a second problem the earlier piece could only hint at: Romano's timeline is dotted with sponsored promotions that blur the line between editorial content and commercial messaging. Yet because McEnnis centres on a single, global figure and analyses only what happens on one platform, he cannot tell us how local reporters adapt when they share a beat with such an actor, nor how audiences judge the competing claims that emerge side by side in their feeds.

Arnon Kedem and Motti Neiger furnish the final step by theorising how a journalist's professional and personal personas fuse into a single, highly recognisable brand. In "Journalists' Ideological Branding: Bridging Professional and Personal Branding on Twitter," they track 2,758 tweets posted by ten Israeli political reporters and supplement the dataset with semi-structured interviews. The result is the concept of ideological branding, an additional layer of self-presentation that "functions as a bridge that connects and integrates the professional and personal levels" (Kedem & Neiger, 2024, p. 2173). Tweets that contain a clear ideological cue - whether a party slogan, a policy demand or a moral stance - attract markedly higher engagement than those that do not, giving reporters a tangible incentive to cultivate recognizable signals of identity. Although Romano's work is devoted to football rather than politics, the mechanism is equally visible: his signature phrase "Here We Go" flags authoritative knowledge, invites rapid sharing and crystallises his brand in three words. Kedem and Neiger therefore explain how visibility becomes convertible into journalistic capital once gate-keeping structures collapse. At the same time, their study is confined to a national-political context, so it does not test whether the same branding logic holds in transnational sports reporting or in a media system shaped by strong public-service norms.

Read in sequence, the three studies trace a profession in mid-transformation. Perreault and Bell map the newsroom's eroding gate; McEnnis shows how a single influencer exploits that opening; and Kedem and Neiger reveal the branding logic that turns audience recognition into authority. Yet the composite picture still lacks an insider account of how reporters themselves narrate the changing balance of power, how legacy and influencer logics collide in day-to-day practice, and how those collisions play out when the scene shifts from a global, English-language market to a smaller Nordic one where public-service norms retain force.

This thesis fills those gaps by pairing semi-structured interviews with a critical-discourse analysis of Fabrizio Romano's and Farzam Abolhosseini's public texts. It (1) brings reporters' own voices into the legitimacy debate, (2) combines Fairclough's three-level model with a micro-linguistic focus on modality to show how high-certainty language simultaneously claims and denies authority, (3) offers a double comparison - legacy versus influencer and Danish versus transnational contexts - to illustrate how platform incentives intersect with regional media culture, and (4) uncovers the dual boundary work whereby Farzam defends institutional capital while Romano accrues visibility capital. In moving from structural maps and performance snapshots to the lived accounts of practitioners, the study advances understanding of legitimacy in a hybrid sports-news field where journalism and influence increasingly overlap.

Theory

This chapter brings together two strands of literature to create a multi-layered framework for analysing transfer journalism. First, Rowe (2004), Hutchins & Rowe (2012) and Boyle & Rowe (2023) trace the evolution of sports-media power, from legacy newsrooms through networked platforms to influencer-driven feeds, showing how symbolic capital migrates from editorial gatekeepers to personal branding. I treat those three as a unified field theory, since they each describe how authority is produced, circulated and contested at the level of institutions and markets. Second, I draw on Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse (text, discursive practice, social practice) and Carvalho's notions of positioning and legitimation to "zoom in" on language itself, identifying how individual clauses, interdiscursive blends and self-framing tags build or defend credibility. Together, these approaches allow the analysis to move seamlessly from big-picture shifts in the sports-media field down to the micro-linguistic and meta-discursive work that Farzam and Romano perform every time they publish.

Field Theory of Sports Journalism

This project draws on three interrelated theoretical works that, while published at different points in time, collectively offer a coherent framework for understanding the transformation of sports journalism. Rowe's "Sport, Culture and the Media" (2004) provides a foundational cultural analysis of sports journalism in its traditional, institutional form. Hutchins & Rowe's "Sport Beyond Television" (2012) extends this perspective into the digital age, analyzing how internet technologies and social platforms reshape the production and consumption of sports media. Finally, Boyle & Rowe's "Sport, Journalism and Social Reproduction" (2023) critically interrogates the current state of the field, emphasizing the crisis of journalistic legitimacy and the socio-cultural consequences of platform-driven, influencer-led news dissemination. Taken together, these works trace a theoretical progression that mirrors the empirical trajectory of this study, moving from the legacy newsroom to the algorithmic feed, and from the accredited journalist to the branded individual. In addition to serving as a theoretical lens, this section also provides historical context, charting how these shifts unfolded over time and setting the stage for the analysis of Farzam and Romano.

Rowe - Sport, Culture and the Media

David Rowe's "Sport, Culture and the Media" from 2004 provides an insightful view on the relationship between sports, media, and culture, examining the professional status of sports journalism, its ethical dilemmas, and the broader social and cultural roles of sports media. Rowe's work critically interrogates how sports journalism functions both within the media industry and within society, highlighting the tension between its popularity and professional legitimacy. His work remains foundational in understanding the changing dynamics within sports journalism, offering a lens through which the evolution of the field, especially in the digital age, can be explored. Rowe's framework offers essential insights for understanding the complexities of sports journalism, particularly in relation to its historical and professional struggles. His exploration of sports media's role in culture, professional status, and the growing influence of digital media provides a multi-layered perspective on the challenges journalists face within the sports industry. This theoretical background will serve as a critical foundation for understanding the shifts in sports journalism that will be explored in later sections of this project.

To begin, Rowe addresses the professional status of sports journalism, emphasizing the persistent struggle it faces in achieving the same level of respect as other journalistic fields, despite its widespread visibility. He notes that sports journalism is often dismissed as the 'toy department' of the news media, a phrase that reflects the long-standing perception that sports journalism is trivial or less intellectually valuable than other journalistic fields (Rowe, 2004, p. 37). This derogatory label persists despite the significant commercial and cultural impact of sports media, reflecting deep-rooted tensions within the profession. As Rowe elaborates, this perception stems from sports journalism's focus on the popular appeal of sport, its emphasis on physical rather than intellectual pursuits, and its historical association with entertainment rather than serious analysis.

Rowe also discusses the conflicting roles that sports journalists are expected to fulfil, which often create significant ethical dilemmas. He highlights that sports journalists are expected to be objective reporters, critical investigators, promoters of teams and athletes, and, in many cases, to have personal experience in the sport they cover (Rowe, 2004, p. 38). This complex web of expectations puts sports journalists in a difficult position, as they must balance their professional obligation to remain objective with the commercial pressures to support the athletes, teams, and sports organizations they cover. Rowe argues that the "normal relationship between sporting organizations and media organizations" often involves "mutually beneficial interdependency" (Rowe, 2004, p. 53), but when this relationship becomes too close, it can compromise journalistic integrity and lead to biased reporting.

Rowe also notes that sports media has traditionally been somewhat insulated from broader social issues. In the past, sports journalism was often treated as a form of "escapism," focusing on entertainment and diverting attention away from more serious social or political issues. As Rowe observes, sports journalists have long adhered to the idea that sport exists in a separate, apolitical world, insulated from the societal issues that dominate other areas of the media (Rowe, 2004, p. 51). This view has become increasingly difficult to maintain, as athletes have become more outspoken about social and political issues, and sports media has been forced to confront the implications of these discussions. Rowe suggests that the increasing prominence of athletes speaking out on issues such as gender equality, racism, and political activism challenges the notion that sports exist in a separate, insulated space. As sports journalism continues to evolve, journalists are now forced to consider how to balance their role in promoting the values of sport with the growing demands for social responsibility and political engagement.

Rowe's theoretical framework offers critical insights into the professional challenges, ethical dilemmas, and cultural functions of sports journalism. By addressing the status and legitimacy of sports journalism, the complex roles of sports journalists, and the broader cultural and social implications of sports media, Rowe offers a comprehensive understanding of the field. His view of the changing media landscape, particularly the rise of digital media and the blurring of boundaries between professional journalism and amateur commentary, offers essential context for examining how sports journalism is evolving in the digital age. This framework will be instrumental in understanding the shifts within the sports journalism industry, particularly in relation to the growing prominence of digital-first journalists and the challenges they pose to traditional journalistic norms.

Hutchins & Rowe - Sport Beyond Television

Building upon Rowe's framework of traditional sports journalism, Brett Hutchins and David Rowe's work "Sport Beyond Television: The Internet, Digital Media and the Rise of Networked Media Sport" from 2012 offers a more contemporary perspective, examining how digital and networked media are reshaping the sports media landscape. While Rowe addresses the professional and ethical challenges within traditional sports journalism, Hutchins & Rowe broaden this discussion by exploring the disruptive forces introduced by the rise of digital platforms. Their examination of the "new media sport order" provides essential insights into the transformation of sports journalism in the digital age, where traditional media outlets face increasing competition from social media, blogs, and citizen journalism. Together, these frameworks offer a comprehensive understanding of how sports journalism is evolving, with a particular focus on the growing influence of digital-first journalists and the shifting professional norms within the field.

To begin, Hutchins & Rowe highlight the emergence of a "new media sport order," driven by the proliferation of personal computing, the internet, mobile media, and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (X), and YouTube (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012, p. 4). They argue that the rapid uptake of these technologies has fundamentally changed how sports content is consumed and distributed. This shift is comparable to the impact of television in the 1950s and 1960s, which ushered in the dominance of broadcast media in the delivery of sports content. However, Hutchins & Rowe point out that this shift is more decentralized than television's rise,

as digital platforms allow for a more fragmented and interactive distribution of content. The internet and social media have broken the traditional model of media control, providing fans with instant access to sports content and commentary, often directly from athletes, journalists, and other fans. As Hutchins & Rowe explain, the increasing interpenetration of "sport as media" with "networked information and communications technologies" marks a shift from thinking about sports media as traditional, linear media to one that is multi-platform and fan-driven (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012, p. 10).

Hutchins & Rowe emphasize that this transition has significant implications for traditional media organizations, which now face growing challenges in maintaining their audience share and profitability. As they note, "there is deep anxiety among the traditional 'power players' of the allied media sport industries—leagues, clubs, and media organizations" (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012, p. 1). These organizations, which have historically dominated the commercial sports media market, are now under pressure from the rise of digital competitors. The increasing influence of social media platforms, which allow fans and independent content creators to share news, analysis, and commentary, has created new competition for traditional outlets. This competition has forced traditional sports media to adapt their business models, balancing the needs of their core audiences with the demand for digital innovation. Hutchins & Rowe further explain that traditional media outlets are grappling with how to "compete with or limit the activities of online content aggregators," which distribute sports news in real-time and with fewer editorial constraints (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012, p. 3). In this environment, traditional news organizations must find new ways to attract audiences while also navigating the fragmented digital landscape.

In addition to the challenges posed by new competitors, Hutchins & Rowe highlight how audience consumption habits are changing in response to the growing availability of digital media. They argue that younger generations, particularly those "growing up with digital technologies (as so-called 'digital natives'), are increasingly assimilating them into their everyday lives" (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012, p. 6). This shift means that sports content is now accessed not only through traditional channels like television and print media but also through social media, mobile apps, and online platforms. These changes in consumption patterns require traditional sports media to rethink how they engage with their audiences. Hutchins & Rowe suggest that "sports media are now being forced to adjust to a fragmented and diverse audience, all of whom consume sports media in different ways" (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012, p. 3). The challenge for

traditional media outlets is not only to retain their audience but also to cater to the diverse preferences of digital-savvy consumers who expect real-time updates and interactive content.

Moreover, Hutchins & Rowe argue that this digital transformation is leading to the rise of "convergent sports journalism," a model where the lines between professional journalism, amateur commentary, and fan-driven content are increasingly blurred (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012, p. 126). They explain that "the co-existence of print and broadcasting gradually eroded working distinctions between commentary and journalism" (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012, p. 126), a trend that has been amplified by the digital environment. As digital media platforms such as blogs, podcasts, and social media allow anyone with an internet connection to share sports news and opinions, the traditional distinctions between professional journalism and amateur or citizen journalism have become less clear. Hutchins & Rowe describe this convergence as a shift from "single-medium journalism" to "multi-platform content production," where journalists are expected to create content across various channels and interact directly with their audience (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012, p. 126). This transformation reflects broader changes in the media industry, where content is no longer confined to one medium but is distributed across a range of platforms to engage with different audiences in real-time.

The rise of what they call "creative cannibalism" is another key aspect of this new digital media environment, where content is repurposed and recycled across platforms in an effort to capture audience attention and maximize engagement. Hutchins & Rowe use the term "creative cannibalism" to describe the phenomenon where digital media outlets rapidly recycle content to compete for "eyeballs" and generate advertising revenue (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012, p. 144). They suggest that in the digital era, online media outlets often prioritize speed and attention-grabbing headlines over the traditional focus on in-depth analysis and journalistic rigor.

Hutchins & Rowe observe that "online media are characterized as engaging in the activity of attention grabbing rather than simply providing sports news" (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012, p. 142). This shift in priorities is evident in the ways that many online sports platforms focus on breaking news and sensational headlines to attract clicks, often at the expense of nuanced, investigative reporting. This emphasis on speed and engagement has created new dynamics in sports journalism, where the competition for audience attention can sometimes overshadow the ethical responsibility of providing accurate and well-researched information.

In this context, the notion of symbolic power helps explain how different actors vie to shape those definitions. Originally formulated by Pierre Bourdieu, symbolic power denotes the capacity to impose meanings and have them taken as legitimate by others within a social field. Hutchins & Rowe transpose the concept to sports journalism, describing the profession as "a continuous battle for symbolic power" (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012, p. 150). In legacy newsrooms, this power was anchored in institutional markers - editorial hierarchies, masthead prestige, formal accreditation and the routine of fact-checking that underwrote a newspaper's authority. Digitalisation, however, reconfigures the sources and visibility of symbolic power. Platform metrics (follower counts, verification badges, engagement rates) now function as alternative signs of journalistic credibility, while algorithmic amplification can elevate individuals who operate outside traditional gatekeeping structures. For a study that interrogates legitimacy amid a shift from print-based to platform-based newswork, symbolic power provides a theoretical lens for specifying the kinds of capital that confer authority as well as the mechanisms through which that authority is publicly recognised.

In conclusion, Hutchins & Rowe's work provides a framework for understanding the ongoing transformation of sports journalism in the digital age. Their thoughts on the challenges faced by traditional sports media outlets, the rise of convergent sports journalism, and the growing influence of citizen journalism offers essential insights into how the industry is adapting to technological advances and changing audience behaviors. The rise of digital-first sports journalists, online platforms, and fan-generated content are reshaping the field, presenting both opportunities and challenges for the future of sports journalism. Hutchins & Rowe's framework will be essential for understanding the broader shifts within the sports media landscape and the growing importance of digital and networked platforms in the production and consumption of sports content.

Boyle & Rowe - Sport, Journalism and Social Reproduction

Building upon the framework provided by Hutchins & Rowe, Raymond Boyle & David Rowe's 2023-work "Sport, Journalism and Social Reproduction" introduces a more nuanced and "modern" examination of sports journalism, particularly in light of the profound shifts brought about by digital media and the increasing prominence of citizen and influencer journalism. While Hutchins & Rowe highlight the structural and technological changes reshaping

traditional sports journalism, Boyle & Rowe delve into the internal dynamics of the profession, focusing on its professional legitimacy, ethical challenges, and the evolving relationship between journalists, their audiences, and broader societal issues. Their examination of how sports journalism has historically operated in a “craft” mode and their call for more critical forms of journalism are directly relevant to the ways in which influencer journalists, such as Fabrizio Romano, disrupt traditional norms. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive understanding of how sports journalism is evolving in the digital age, offering valuable context for analyzing the rise of digital-first and influencer-driven journalism in your project.

Boyle & Rowe begin by addressing the ongoing struggle of sports journalism for professional legitimacy, a challenge that has intensified in the era of digital media and audience-driven content. They argue that "sports journalism has long been controversial for a number of reasons, such as its struggle for legitimacy in a domain of popular culture where any fan can claim expertise" (Boyle & Rowe, 2023, p. 9). This critique remains particularly relevant in the context of digital journalism, where platforms like X, Instagram, and YouTube have allowed non-professional “journalists” such as influencers and fans to directly challenge professional sports journalists by producing content that reaches vast audiences. The rise of influencers like Fabrizio Romano, who has gained a significant following by providing real-time updates on football transfers, exemplifies this challenge to traditional journalistic authority. Boyle & Rowe’s observation that "any fan can claim expertise" is precisely the dynamic at play in digital journalism today, where the boundaries between professional and amateur content creators are increasingly blurred.

This tension is compounded by the growing presence of "citizen journalists" - i.e. those who create and share sports content without formally being part of the journalism profession, as also explained previously. As Boyle & Rowe note, the rise of social media platforms has led to fans interacting in the same communicative space as professional journalists, with "citizen sports journalists" claiming equivalence with their professional counterparts (Boyle & Rowe, 2023, p. 5). This phenomenon is highly relevant for this project, as the popularity of figures like Romano challenges the professionalization of sports journalism. Influencers, who engage with fans directly and break news in real-time, have disrupted the traditional gatekeeping role of journalists and media organizations. The idea of "citizen journalism" blurring the lines between fans and journalists speaks directly to the evolving nature of digital-first journalism, which

prioritizes immediacy and fan interaction over the slower, more methodical reporting of traditional outlets.

Boyle & Rowe further explore how sports journalism, despite its contested legitimacy, operates as a “craft” or a "profession dedicated to the mediation of sport for a range of publics" (Boyle & Rowe, 2023, p. 6). Historically, this profession has served multiple audiences, including sports fans, the general public, and key institutions like sports organizations and the state. However, the democratization of sports media through digital platforms has redefined what it means to be a sports journalist. In the digital age, the profession has expanded beyond traditional media institutions, with platforms such as blogs, YouTube channels, and Twitter feeds becoming legitimate spaces for sports journalism. The influencer model of sports journalism, exemplified by figures like Fabrizio Romano, represents an extension of this shift, where individuals with large social media followings act as intermediaries between sports organizations and fans, often bypassing traditional editorial structures. This shift toward decentralized, fan-driven content production is a critical development in the evolution of sports journalism, as it reflects a move from a "craft" rooted in professional institutions to a more fluid, networked form of content creation.

Boyle & Rowe also note the profound impact of the rise of online platforms and digital media on the role of sports journalists, particularly in terms of audience interaction. They emphasize that the "audience is itself operating in the same communicative space, with fans interacting via online, social, and mobile media" Boyle & Rowe, 2023, (p. 5). This blurring of the boundaries between the audience and the journalist is especially relevant to the study of influencer journalism. Figures like Romano have cultivated direct relationships with their followers, where fans not only consume content but also engage with journalists by commenting, sharing, and responding to updates in real-time. This interactivity has transformed the role of the sports journalist from a passive producer of information to an active participant in a two-way conversation with their audience. Romano’s success as a digital-first journalist is a direct reflection of this shift in the communicative relationship between sports media producers and consumers.

In the platform-driven environment described by Boyle and Rowe, sports journalists increasingly operate not only as reporters but also as media personalities and brands. As they observe, “this more fluid and complex media environment has resulted in branding and brand management issues becoming more central in media sport debates and, in short, have helped fuel an ongoing battle for control over sports content and the narratives that surround it. Often, this

process has had a commercial dimension" (Boyle & Rowe, 2023, p. 5). This development highlights a structural tension between traditional journalistic norms, such as verification, editorial accountability, and institutional authority, and newer platform logics, which prioritise speed, visibility, and personal reach. As a result, different forms of journalistic legitimacy have emerged: one grounded in professional editorial systems, and another centred around individual reputation, follower metrics, and algorithmic amplification.

Furthermore, Boyle & Rowe highlight the importance of critical reflection in sports journalism, arguing that "more critical forms of sports journalism are urgently required, as old repressive orthodoxies come under challenge" (Boyle & Rowe, 2023, p. 9). The growing dominance of digital platforms and fan-driven content challenges the traditional orthodoxy of sports journalism, where journalists often acted as gatekeepers, offering a controlled narrative of sports events. The rise of influencers who provide more personalized, often less filtered content, challenges this model and calls for a reevaluation of what constitutes responsible and critical sports journalism. While Romano's focus on breaking news might not directly engage with these deeper social issues, the growing influence of influencer journalism as a form of independent, critical media is an important trend that challenges traditional journalistic structures.

Overall, Boyle & Rowe's framework offers critical insights into the ongoing challenges of sports journalism in the digital era. Their work highlights the tension between the professionalization of the field and the rise of citizen and influencer journalists, who operate outside traditional editorial constraints and offer a more immediate, interactive form of sports coverage. The authors also emphasize the need for more critical forms of sports journalism, especially as the boundaries between professional and amateur journalism continue to blur. By examining the struggles for legitimacy, the evolution of journalistic practices, and the increasing influence of fan-driven content, Boyle & Rowe's framework provides valuable context for understanding the role of digital journalism and influencer sports media in reshaping the landscape of sports journalism.

Synthesis

The three selected works outline a continuous reconfiguration of authority in sports journalism. Rowe (2004) establishes a field in which the sports desk, despite its commercial reach,

occupies a low position in the newsroom's hierarchy of esteem; legitimacy there is underwritten by institutional routines, and journalists wield influence primarily through the construction of cultural narratives. Hutchins & Rowe (2012) show how digital infrastructures destabilise that settlement: convergent sports journalism expands the reporter's technical workload, while the democratisation of media production invites non-professionals into the news market; the logic of creative cannibalism, in turn, rewards speed and constant repackaging over depth. Boyle & Rowe (2023) recast the situation in explicitly Bourdieusian terms, arguing that symbolic power is now allocated through algorithmic visibility and that citizen sports journalists compete directly with accredited reporters for public trust.

Taken together these concepts delineate a single theoretical trajectory: legitimacy migrates from editorial endorsement to platform metrics; the boundary between professional and amateur becomes porous; and narrative authority is negotiated in real time across multiple, interlinked formats. This synthesis provides the analytical scaffolding for the ensuing case study, clarifying the criteria by which the project will compare how a legacy-trained reporter and a platform-native insider accumulate, display and ultimately contest journalistic legitimacy in the contemporary sports-media ecology.

Fairclough - Discourse and Social Change

Rowe, Hutchins and Boyle map the large-scale migration of sports journalism from institutional newsrooms to platform-centred, brand-driven ecosystems. Their macro narrative shows what is changing but not how that change is enacted in the minute-by-minute communicative work of reporters. For that bridge I adopt Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional conception of discourse. While Fairclough's framework is sometimes used as methodology, in this thesis it will be treated as theory, because he supplies propositions about the social power of language that will later guide analysis rather than dictate mechanical steps. His core claim is constitutive: discourse "helps construct social identities, social relationships and systems of knowledge and belief" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 64). If legitimacy is something journalists must actively build in language, then a theoretical lens that treats language as social construction is essential.

Fairclough's model is three-dimensional and involves analyzing discourse at three levels: (1) text analysis, (2) discursive practice, and (3) social practice. These dimensions help in understanding how language operates at various levels; from the specific language used in a text, through to how texts are produced, distributed, and consumed, to how broader social structures shape and are shaped by discourse. Fairclough's multilayer approach allows us to examine how Romano's digital journalism challenges traditional models, while also examining the institutional practices that continue to define Farzam's approach. This allows us to critically engage with the ongoing paradigm shift in sports journalism.

In the following, I will present the key concepts from Fairclough's theory and explain how they can be applied to understanding the changing landscape of sports journalism, with specific attention to Fabrizio Romano's influencer-driven model and Farzam Abolhosseini's traditional journalism.

Textual Analysis

The first step toward answering how each reporter construes and justifies legitimacy is to zoom in on the linguistic fabric of their communication. Fairclough's textual level lets us do exactly that by asking how meaning is organised inside the borders of a single utterance. He highlights "large-scale organisational properties of texts" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 75) and the principle of coherence. Coherence, he reminds us, is not something a text simply has but something readers actively make: "coherence is often treated as a property of texts, but it is better regarded as a property of interpretations" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 83). Writers supply cues, such as framing devices, sequencing, thematic echoes, but yet audiences assemble those cues into a meaningful pattern; legitimacy therefore begins in this collaborative work of signalling and recognising coherence.

Platform environments compress those signals into instantly recognisable tags, signature phrases, timestamps and emoji strings that allow dispersed users to grasp and re-circulate a message within seconds. Legacy reportage, by contrast, constructs coherence through slower narrative scaffolds: headline–lead–body order, quote pyramids and contextual sidebars invite readers to build understanding line by line. Mapping these organisational choices later will reveal how each media setting rewards distinct textual tactics for projecting authority.

Within Fairclough's framework, modality designates "the dimension of the grammar of the clause which corresponds to the 'inter-personal' function of language" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 158). Put simply, it is the set of linguistic resources that speakers use to signal how strongly they align themselves with the truth of a proposition and how much they invite the audience to share that stance. Fairclough notes that modality can be subjective "in the sense that the subjective basis for the selected degree of affinity with a proposition may be made explicit" (p. 159), for example when a journalist writes "I can confirm" or "I think it is likely". Conversely, it can be objective "where this subjective basis is left implicit" (p. 159). Attending to these choices is crucial for my project: the differential ways Farzam and Romano calibrate certainty, speculation and authority in their transfer-news posts reveal how each cultivates legitimacy. Tracing shifts from high-modality (assertive, declarative) to low-modality (tentative, conjectural) formulations therefore becomes a diagnostic for how social-media metrics and professional norms intersect in their discursive performance of journalistic credibility.

Discursive Practice

Where the textual level examines the organisation of meaning inside a single utterance, Fairclough's second level turns outward to the flow of discourse: how texts are produced, circulated and taken up "in specific social contexts" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 78). At this hinge point between Rowe's platform labour and linguistic form, two concepts are especially revealing for a study of transfer reporting.

The first key tool is interdiscursivity, Fairclough's term for the mixing of discourse types within a single communicative act. Genre boundaries are, he notes, "relatively durable articulations of social practice" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 118); when those boundaries blur, it signals a shift in the underlying social order. Even in a long-form interview, platform pressures show through moments of formal reportage, conversational storytelling, personal branding and subtle self-promotion frequently intermingle. Charting where such strands merge in the transcripts will later allow the analysis to demonstrate how platform conditions encourage one communicator to oscillate between reporter, audience-engager and brand custodian, softening the once-sharp line between hard-news discourse and informal banter.

The second tool is metadiscourse. When a writer steps outside the message to label or evaluate it—"Breaking", "Confirmed", "Sources tell me"—they create a frame that instructs readers how seriously to take the subsequent information and why it merits their trust. Fairclough calls this self-reflexive move a form of discursive positioning in which the speaker "situates herself above or outside her own discourse" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 122). On platforms, metadiscourse becomes an on-the-fly accreditation system: it substitutes for editorial mastheads, sub-editor vetting and other legacy markers of authority. In a feed where thousands of voices compete for attention, the speed and frequency of such self-authorising tags are crucial to maintaining credibility.

For this thesis the discursive-practice level is indispensable. The research question asks how a newsroom-anchored journalist and a platform-native insider each justify legitimacy. Interdiscursivity shows which genres they must juggle to satisfy divergent audience expectations; metadiscourse shows the real-time cues they deploy to claim authority without waiting for institutional endorsement. By tracing these production and circulation routines, the later analysis can demonstrate that legitimacy is negotiated not only in what is said but, just as critically, in how the saying is framed, blended and distributed across the platform-driven news ecology.

Social Practice

At Fairclough's outermost level the analysis reconnects micro-linguistic choices to the macro structures of power and economy that shape them. Drawing on Gramsci, Fairclough argues that discourse participates in the making and unmaking of hegemony, i.e. the common-sense alignments through which particular groups or institutions maintain dominance (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 102-103). In sports media the hegemonic centre once lay almost exclusively inside institutional newsrooms: editors-controlled access to sources, set verification standards and defined what counted as legitimate knowledge. Platform architectures have disrupted that settlement by redistributing symbolic capital toward individual journalists whose social-media followings rival those of newspapers. Whether this shift merely supplements institutional authority or genuinely displaces it is precisely the sort of field-level question that the social-practice layer is designed to illuminate.

Fairclough's notion of commodification adds an economic inflection to this power analysis. He observes that social domains "whose concern is not producing commodities in the narrower economic sense of goods for sale, come nevertheless to be organized and conceptualized in terms of commodity production, distribution and consumption" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 207). Transfer news now circulates as a monetizable asset measured in clicks, sponsorship deals and algorithmic reach, linguistic packaging at the textual level and circulation rituals at the discursive level feed directly into that valuation. Boyle and Rowe describe reporters increasingly "managing both story and self as marketable products," and commodification supplies the conceptual link between that observation and the discursive evidence that will later be examined.

For this thesis, then, the social-practice dimension frames the stakes of the comparison between a newsroom-anchored reporter and a platform-native insider. If influencer discourse normalises personal branding as the basis of authority, it may entrench a new hegemony in which algorithmic visibility replaces editorial endorsement. Conversely, any persistence of institutional gatekeeping in the language of legitimacy would signal a hybrid settlement rather than a complete power transfer. By situating textual and discursive findings within questions of hegemony and commodification, Fairclough's outer layer turns individual utterances into evidence about the broader paradigm shift from institutional to influencer-centred sports journalism that lies at the heart of the study's problem formulation.

Linking the Levels

Setting Fairclough's tri-layered account of discourse beside the field-level work of Rowe, Hutchins and Boyle yields a genuinely multi-resolution theory of sports journalism. At the innermost tier, textual analysis asks how signals of legitimacy are woven into structure and coherence. One step out, discursive-practice analysis follows those signals as they travel; watching hybrid genres, interdiscursive blends and metadiscursive tags turn textual cues into real-time currency. The outer social-practice tier then examines whether the resulting routines shore up or unsettle the power hierarchies that organise the sports-news field. By moving outward in this way, from sentence structure to circulation ritual to fieldwide authority, the study can translate broad claims about platformization into concrete linguistic evidence. The layered framework therefore equips the forthcoming analysis to show, with precision but without yet

touching a single interview line, how journalists construct, contest and monetise legitimacy in today's hybrid media landscape.

Positioning and Legitimation

While Fairclough's model provides a structured approach to understanding how discourse is shaped by and contributes to broader social practices, it remains relatively general in its application to media contexts. To further specify how journalists actively construct roles and relationships through language within the field of media communication, this project also draws on Anabela Carvalho's work on media discourse. In her approach, Carvalho extends critical discourse theory by focusing on how media texts not only reflect but actively mediate social relations and ideological positions.

One of Carvalho's key contributions is the concept of positioning, which she defines as "a discursive strategy that involves constructing social actors into a certain relationship with others" (Carvalho, 2008, p. 169). This concept will be used in the analysis to examine how journalists discursively situate themselves in relation to audiences, institutions, and sources. By attending to these forms of strategic self-presentation, Carvalho's framework offers a valuable supplement to Fairclough, adding a more media-specific and interactional perspective on how authority, identity, and influence are negotiated in contemporary sports journalism.

Another useful concept from Carvalho's media discourse framework is *legitimation*. This refers to the ways in which actors justify their positions, actions, or authority within a particular communicative context. As Carvalho defines it, "legitimation consists in justifying and sanctioning a certain action or power, on the basis of normative or other reasons" (Carvalho 2008, p. 169). In the context of journalism, legitimation can be understood as the discursive work of establishing one's role as credible, necessary, or authoritative—whether through appeals to accuracy, access, speed, or public value. This is particularly relevant in a media environment where traditional forms of journalistic legitimacy are being challenged by alternative models such as influencer-based reporting, making legitimacy itself a central object of negotiation.

Taken together, all of these theoretical perspectives - from Rowe and co. to Fairclough and Carvalho - provide a multi-layered framework for analysing the paradigm shift from traditional to digital sports journalism. Rowe, Hutchins, and Boyle trace a trajectory from the marginalised

yet institutionally bound sports desk to a fragmented, platform-driven media ecology where legitimacy is increasingly tied to visibility, engagement, and speed. Fairclough and Carvalho, in turn, enables a more detailed examination of how these shifts are realised in practice, through text structure, communicative routines, and the discursive construction of journalistic identity.

This combined framework informs the comparative case study that follows. By analysing both the structural positions and discursive practices of Farzam Abolhosseini and Fabrizio Romano, the project aims to shed light on how journalistic authority is renegotiated in an era where editorial endorsement coexists, and often competes, with algorithmic reach and personal branding.

Methodology

Research Design and Overall Approach

This thesis adopts a qualitative, interpretivist–constructivist research strategy in which knowledge is viewed as co-constructed and context dependent (Bryman, 2012). Its empirical backbone is a semi-structured interview with Danish sports journalist Farzam Abolhosseini, designed to illuminate how a legacy-media reporter negotiates the hybrid, platform-driven sports-news arena.

To theorise the rise of personality-driven journalism, the study introduces a contrasting case: Fabrizio Romano, an Italian transfer insider whose brand epitomises platform-first legitimacy. Direct access proved unfeasible, so Romano is represented by a YouTube-Interview published by Rising Ballers on 9 July 2024, covering his sourcing practice, branding philosophy and views on legacy media. Together these two data sources constitute a qualitative comparative case study in Bryman's sense of "two meaningfully contrasting cases analysed with comparable methods" (Bryman, 2012, p. 72).

Epistemologically the project is interpretivist: it seeks to grasp how actors themselves understand their professional world. Ontologically it is constructivist, assuming that journalistic legitimacy is discursively produced rather than fixed. Analytically the study follows an abductive logic - moving iteratively between emergent data and existing theory to derive the most plausible explanation of each journalist's legitimacy work. Abduction occupies a conceptual middle ground between Romano's largely inductive self-presentation and the deductive scaffolding of my interview guide.

To design and carry out the interview with Farzam, I rely primarily on the framework outlined by Svend Brinkmann and Steinar Kvale in their seminal work "Doing Interviews" from 2018. The book provides a comprehensive and reflective guide to qualitative interviewing, combining philosophical foundations with practical techniques. Brinkmann and Kvale view the qualitative research interview as an intersubjective encounter; a process of meaning-making where interviewer and interviewee co-construct knowledge. They propose a seven-stage model for interview research: (1) thematizing, (2) designing, (3) interviewing, (4) transcribing, (5) analysing, (6) verifying, and (7) reporting (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, pp. 40–41). In this thesis, I focus on stages 1, 2, 3, and 5, as they are most relevant to the methodological and analytical dimensions of the project.

Data collection

Assembling the Fabrizio corpus

Fabrizio Romano was chosen because he represents the apotheosis of influencer-style football journalism. Widely dubbed the global "transfer-guru," he has amassed more than 60 million followers across X, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok and is the primary reference point whenever mainstream outlets cite player-transfer rumours. His prominence makes him an ideal foil to Farzam's hybrid legacy profile, allowing the study to contrast two poles of journalistic legitimacy: institutional affiliation versus personal brand authority.

To capture Romano's self-articulated practice I first sought direct access via e-mail, as well as direct messages on various social media platforms. These attempts proved unsuccessful, which of course was a sad, but somewhat expected outcome when approaching a media figure operating on a near-continuous news cycle and fielding hundreds of daily requests. The next-best

source was a recent, in-depth public conversation that mirrors a semi-structured interview: a 37-minute long interview with “Rising Ballers”, a London-based Gen-Z football media brand that reaches roughly 90 million fans each month[1]. This interview was selected because it:

- offers the most comprehensive and up-to-date discussion of Romano’s sourcing, verification and branding philosophy
- employs a single-interviewer format analogous to my Farzam conversation, enabling methodological symmetry
- explicitly addresses Romano’s relationship with traditional outlets and his role in the transfer-news ecosystem
- presents an uninterrupted, long-form setting with both audio and visual cues, allowing richer critical-discourse analysis of Romano’s language, tone and self-presentation

Selecting and Preparing the Farzam Case

Farzam Abolhosseini is a leading Danish sports journalist at *Tipsbladet*, one of the country’s largest football outlets. He’s widely recognised in the Danish football media landscape for his consistent ability to break transfer news ahead of competitors, earning him a reputation among fans and peers alike. He is also highly visible on Twitter (X), where he interacts with readers and shares his stories. This dual positioning, within a traditional media outlet and as an independent digital actor, makes him an ideal subject for exploring how journalistic authority is constructed, negotiated, and performed in a hybrid media environment.

On social media, Farzam has been referred to as "the Danish Fabrizio Romano", a comparison that captures both the stylistic similarities and the professional tensions between legacy media practices and emerging influencer-style journalism. His insider knowledge, platform visibility and credibility within the football community place him at the centre of the dynamics this thesis seeks to analyse. Interviewing him therefore offers a unique vantage point on how journalists balance traditional integrity with the speed- and visibility-driven logic of digital sports media, which aligns well with the qualitative interview’s capacity to reveal how actors experience and

[1] https://www.risingballers.co.uk/#about

understand their world (2018, p. 10). A detailed interview guide and its thematic rationale are presented in the following section.

Thematizing and Designing the Interview

This stage clarified the study's purpose: to understand how a legacy-based journalist perceives and practices legitimacy in a platform-driven landscape and how he views the rise of influencer-style reporting. In refining this focus I engaged in domain immersion, by reading Farzam's transfer stories, scrolling his X timeline and following Romano's real-time scoops. Recurring motifs such as speed, verification claims and personal branding emerged, signalling where to probe during the interview. Concurrently, a brief theory-mapping exercise aligned these motifs with concepts from sports-media research.

Guided by these insights, I opted for a semi-structured format that balances thematic consistency with conversational openness, which is precisely what Brinkmann & Kvale describe as "obtaining descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena" (2018, p. 9). The design translated the domain-immersion motifs and theory-mapping concepts into five thematic clusters, each serving a specific analytical purpose. The clusters, and the specific questions nested within them, are introduced below:

1) **Journalistic identity and self-understanding**

- How would you describe your own role as a sports journalist today?
- Do you see yourself as a traditional journalist, a digital journalist, or somewhere in between?

These questions were intended to reveal how Farzam positions himself in relation to the professional field and to explore whether he sees himself as aligned with legacy norms or the newer, more individualised digital journalist persona. It provided insight into how identity is navigated within a shifting media landscape.

2) **Journalistic method and source practices**

- How do you practically work with transfer stories - where does the information come from?
- Do you have contact with clubs, agents or players?
- Why is it so often you who breaks the story?
- How do you assess whether something is reliable enough to publish?
- Do you have internal rules or boundaries?
- At what point do you feel confident enough to go public with a story?

These questions aimed to uncover the mechanics of Farzam's journalistic work. I wanted to understand his relationship with sources and his internal standards for verification. This helps to examine how credibility and access are established in a field increasingly shaped by speed and competition.

3) Media logic, speed, and credibility

- How do you balance the desire for credibility with the need for speed and visibility?
- What do you think about being referred to as "the Danish Fabrizio Romano"?
- What is your opinion of Fabrizio Romano and the way he works?
- Has his model influenced how "real" journalists operate?

These questions were designed to explore the tension between traditional journalistic ideals and the realities of working within a fast-paced, digitally driven ecosystem. They also allowed Farzam to reflect on how external comparisons shape his professional narrative.

4) Social media and audience relations

- What role do social media play in your work, and how has that changed over time?
- You often post your stories on Twitter with a link to Tipsbladet - do you do this primarily to drive traffic to their website, or also to reinforce your personal brand, by showcasing that is <u>your</u> story?

These questions sought to unpack how Farzam uses digital platforms not only as dissemination tools but also as sites for performing identity and constructing journalistic authority.

5) Outlook and future perspectives

- How do you think sports journalism will evolve in the coming 5–10 years?
- Do you see a conflict or a possibility for coexistence between traditional media and the digital wave?

These questions allowed Farzam to situate his experiences within broader trends and to speculate on the future trajectory of the field, adding a forward-looking dimension to the interview.

Conducting the Interview

The interview was conducted by telephone, which offered a convenient and direct format for the type of open, semi-structured conversation I had planned. A few days prior to the formal interview, I had a short phone conversation with Farzam to brief him on the project's aims, explain the research focus, and schedule a time. While I did not share the specific questions in advance, this preliminary call helped establish trust and provided clarity on what the interview would entail.

The interview itself began and ended with informal small talk, including light personal conversation to establish rapport. These segments are not included in the transcript in the appendix, as they were not relevant to the analytical aims of the project. Shortly after we began the recorded interview, Farzam received an urgent call from a source and had to pause the interview briefly. Although the interview was interrupted for a few minutes, we quickly regained focus and resumed the conversation in a productive and concentrated manner.

Throughout the interview, I aimed to facilitate a comfortable yet professional atmosphere. Brinkmann and Kvale note that "the first minutes of an interview are decisive" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 62), and that a good interview depends on establishing "a stage where the subject is free and safe to talk of private events for later public use" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 10). I employed active listening techniques and followed up on significant statements using probes and clarifying questions, which created space for depth and reflection. The semi-structured nature of the interview also allowed me to shift sequence or rephrase questions to follow the interviewee's narrative, in line with the idea that "there is openness to changes of sequence and forms of questions in order to follow up the specific answers given" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 58).

Data Analysis

The preceding sections have centred on how I designed and conducted the Farzam interview, because it was the only conversation I organised personally. At this stage, however, both datasets - the Danish transcript with Farzam Abolhosseini and the English transcript of Fabrizio Romano's Rising Ballers interview - enter the analysis on equal terms and follow the same procedure. Each interview was first transcribed in full, and all citations that appear throughout the thesis are rendered in English for consistency.

The analytical strategy is abductive in Brinkmann & Kvale's sense, moving back and forth between empirical observations and theoretical ideas until the most convincing explanation takes shape (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 119). I approached the transcripts through several slow, memo-based readings, allowing preliminary impressions to surface and then revisiting them with theory in hand.

At the interpretive core lies Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse - text, discursive practice and social practice - which situates individual word choices within professional routines and, ultimately, within the power relations that structure the football-news field. To sharpen this layer, I adopted Anabela Carvalho's categories of legitimation and positioning, asking how each reporter claims authority, frames ethical stance and justifies the speed–accuracy trade-off that defines transfer reporting.

Finally, insights from these transcript-level readings were set against the broader trajectory mapped by Rowe, Hutchins & Rowe, and Boyle & Rowe on the migration of sports journalism toward digital, platform-centred logics. Romano's platform-native discourse, steeped in follower metrics and algorithmic reach, illustrates the influencer-based legitimacy these authors describe, while Farzam's language, anchored in newsroom routines yet attuned to social-media visibility, shows how institutional and platform logics now overlap.

Throughout, the goal was not to code and count themes but to conduct what Brinkmann & Kvale call a theoretical reading: repeated engagement with the material, each time testing emerging interpretations against both cases and against the theoretical concepts in play (Brink-

mann & Kvale, 2018, p. 134). The result is a layered account of how a legacy-embedded reporter and a platform-native insider each construct and defend journalistic legitimacy within today's platform-driven sports-media landscape.

Comparative analysis

This thesis employs a qualitative comparative method as outlined by Bryman, who defines it as "studying two contrasting cases using more or less identical methods" (Bryman, 2012, p. 72). The aim is to explore the differences between traditional and digital sports journalism through two meaningfully contrasting cases: a semi-structured interview with Danish sports journalist Farzam Abolhosseini and an analysis of public statements and interview material featuring Fabrizio Romano, a prominent figure in digital-first, influencer-driven sports reporting. These two cases reflect different journalistic paradigms and media environments and serve as a basis for analysing the broader transformation of the journalistic field.

As Bryman notes, "the comparative design can also be applied in relation to a qualitative research strategy. When this occurs, it takes the form of a multiple-case study" (Bryman, 2012, p. 74). This thesis adopts this approach by focusing on two in-depth cases examined through similar methods, allowing for a systematic comparison of how journalism is practiced, legitimised, and communicated in distinct contexts.

Crucially, the comparative approach not only facilitates thematic and structural contrasts but also allows for the inclusion of cultural and national dimensions. As Bryman observes, "one of the more obvious forms of such research is in cross-cultural or cross-national research" (Bryman, 2012, p. 72). This becomes relevant in the present study, as Farzam Abolhosseini explicitly reflects on differences in journalistic norms and expectations between Denmark and Southern European countries.

The comparative method thereby enables a context-sensitive analysis that deepens the understanding of journalistic practices within two contrasting yet interconnected media ecologies. As Bryman states, "we can understand social phenomena better when they are compared in relation to two or more meaningfully contrasting cases or situations" (Bryman, 2012, p. 72). Importantly, the aim of the comparison is not merely descriptive; rather, "the key to the comparative design is its ability to allow the distinguishing characteristics of two or more cases to

act as a springboard for theoretical reflections about contrasting findings" (Bryman, 2012, p. 75). In this sense, the comparative design serves as a bridge between empirical insights and the broader theoretical discussion surrounding the shift from traditional to digital journalism.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical reflections that follow pertain mainly to the primary interview with Farzam Abolhosseini, as that's the only data in this study generated through direct researcher-participant interaction. Ethical concerns were considered at every stage of the research process. In line with Brinkmann and Kvale's assertion that "an interview inquiry is a moral enterprise" (Brinkmann & Kvale 2018, p. 28), special attention was paid to informed consent, the interview setting, and the responsible use of the material. Farzam was provided with a clear and transparent briefing before the interview began. He was informed about the purpose of the research, how the interview data would be used, and his right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

Permission to record the conversation was obtained prior to the interview, and Farzam explicitly agreed to be cited by name. This approach aligns with the argument made by Parker (2005, as cited in Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 33) that anonymity should not always be the default, particularly when participants wish to have their voice represented authentically. Throughout the process, I aimed to uphold the integrity of the interview setting by maintaining professional boundaries while fostering a respectful and open dialogue.

Moreover, care was taken not to steer the conversation in a way that would put the interviewee under pressure or lead to self-censorship. The questions were open-ended and flexible, giving the participant agency in deciding how much to disclose. I was attentive to sensitive themes and refrained from pushing on potentially uncomfortable topics, thereby ensuring that the conversation remained ethically sound as well as analytically rich.

In addition, I remained conscious of my own role as interviewer. Since qualitative interviewing is inherently shaped by the interviewer's positionality and interpretive lens, I sought to remain self-reflective throughout the research process. Ethical integrity was embedded not only to

comply with formal academic standards, but to honour the collaborative and interpersonal nature of qualitative interview research and to produce knowledge that respects the autonomy and dignity of the participant.

Limitations

Every methodological choice draws a boundary around what the study can and cannot say, and this project is no exception. Its most obvious constraint is asymmetric access; I conducted a bespoke interview with Farzam Abolhosseini, whereas the Fabrizio Romano material derives from a single, publicly available conversation over which I had no control. Because I could not pose follow-up questions to Romano, his reflections are shaped by another interviewer's agenda; the comparison therefore leans toward richer nuance on the legacy-media side. Although repeated attempts were made to interview Romano directly, his global profile and workload rendered access impractical, leaving the Rising Ballers episode as the most informative alternative.

A second limitation is the deliberately narrow, two-case design. Examining one legacy-anchored reporter and one platform-native insider can illuminate a paradigm shift but cannot capture its full diversity; the findings should be read as analytical illustrations rather than statistically representative claims about all transfer journalists. Relatedly, both interviews are performative public artefacts. Romano, whose brand thrives on visibility, speaks to millions; Farzam, though less global, still knows his words may circulate. Because each interview is a public performance, both journalists are inclined to emphasise their strengths, while downplaying any errors or controversial tactics. A further limitation is generational scope: Farzam (born 1983) and Romano (born 1993) both came of age in a media environment where digital platforms were already central. The study therefore lacks the perspective of an older, print-era reporter who operates almost exclusively in traditional outlets; including such a voice might have sharpened the contrast between institutional and influencer models even more.

Language and medium add further constraints. Farzam's interview was conducted in Danish and translated by the researcher; despite back-checking, subtle tonal cues may have shifted. The Romano data, captured in video, contain visual and vocal nuances that a telephone interview cannot replicate, complicating micro-level comparison. Temporally, both datasets cluster around the 2024–25 transfer cycle; legitimacy strategies may evolve outside that news window.

Finally, the interpretive stance itself is a limitation. Abductive, memo-based analysis privileges depth over replicability and is inevitably coloured by my own background as a Danish student of culture and communication and a lifelong football follower. Reflexive diaries, peer debriefs, and member confirmation mitigate but do not erase this subjectivity.

Taken together, these conditions mean the thesis offers a context-specific, time-bound reading of how two prominent transfer reporters construct legitimacy. Rather than invalidating the insights, the limitations invite cautious transfer of the conclusions and highlight paths for future work: multi-cycle, multi-country studies, direct access to influencer journalists, and mixed-method designs that track audience reception alongside journalistic self-presentation.

Analysis

In the following, I analyse two prominent football-transfer reporters, each representing a different model of journalistic practice within today's platform-driven media landscape. The first is Farzam Abolhosseini, a senior football journalist working for the Danish sports media outlet *Tipsbladet*. The second is Fabrizio Romano, an independent, social-media based Italian journalist known for his rapid and highly visible coverage of football transfers on social media.

The analysis is based on two interview sources. The interview with Farzam Abolhosseini is a qualitative, semi-structured research interview conducted by the author in April 2024. It provides direct insight into his views on journalistic integrity, editorial responsibility, and the impact of digital platforms on his work. The second interview, with Fabrizio Romano, is a publicly available video interview conducted by *Rising Ballers* and published on YouTube in February 2024. Although not conducted for this thesis, the interview offers a rich and detailed account of Romano's self-understanding, work ethic, and approach to transfer journalism in a digital media environment. Both interviews have been transcribed and are included in the appendices.

The analysis is structured in three main parts. First, I examine the interview with Farzam Abolhosseini, focusing on how he constructs his professional identity and legitimacy within

the framework of traditional institutional journalism. Next, I analyse the interview with Fabrizio Romano, with a focus on how he builds authority through platform visibility, audience engagement, and personal branding. Finally, I compare the two cases to explore what their contrasting approaches reveal about the broader paradigm shift from institutional to influencer-centred sports journalism.

Farzam Abolhosseini Interview

Constructing a Journalistic Identity

Farzam's self-understanding as a journalist reflects a hybrid identity, one that negotiates between traditional journalistic norms and the realities of a platform-driven landscape. When asked how he would describe his role, he states: "*Yeah, it's probably somewhere in between, even though I'm pretty sure that people outwardly have a clear picture of who I am and what I am*" (appx. 1, p. 1). This positioning reflects what Carvalho terms a discursive strategy of self-identification, where the speaker constructs a professional identity in relation to his audience's perceptions (Carvalho, 2008, p. 169). Farzam acknowledges the strong public association of his persona with transfer news, yet resists being reduced to that label. He insists, "*I still consider myself traditional in some ways. It's not like I've stepped away from, in quotation marks, 'normal' journalism*" (appx. 1, p. 1).

This assertion is critical in light of Boyle & Rowe's argument that professional legitimacy in sports journalism is increasingly contested. Farzam's invocation of traditional routines, like "*I'm often at stadiums. I cover matches like all my colleagues do. I conduct interviews the same way*" (appx. 1, p. 1) suggests that he anchors his legitimacy in practices historically associated with journalistic authority. These comments underscore his commitment to legacy norms, even as he operates within a fast-moving digital context.

Farzam repeatedly distances himself from what he calls agenda-driven or interest-driven stories. These are stories that serve a purpose for a source, typically a player, agent, or club without being substantiated by independently verified facts. As Farzam puts it: "*I've always said I want to get far away from that*" (appx. 1, p. 2). He explains that he only reports transfer news if there is "something concrete" he can point to, such as scouts attending a match or meetings taking

place. This principled stance reflects a deep aversion to functioning as a mere mouthpiece for vested interests. Rather than relying on vague transfer speculation or unverified claims, Farzam grounds his reporting in concrete, observable facts. He explains: "*I'll write that three clubs are after a player, but I will specify that they were seen at the stadium. That way, you, or any journalist, can contact those clubs and ask, 'Were you there?' And then they can't deny it*" (appx. 1, p. 2). This choice functions as a discursive strategy - a deliberate way of structuring talk and text - that privileges verifiability over speed or sensationalism. By anchoring his stories in tangible evidence such as physical presence at matches, Farzam positions himself within a discourse of accountability and distances his practice from the agenda-driven narratives that often circulate in digital spaces. His discourse here aligns with Fairclough's notion of textual coherence, where the authority of a text is not only based on style or framing, but on the availability of independently confirmable facts. In this way, Farzam reinforces a model of journalism that remains accountable to external reality, rather than one shaped by rumour or platform dynamics.

Farzam's habit of attaching a checkable detail to each claim, like "three clubs were seen at the stadium", enacts the principle of textual coherence that Fairclough foregrounds. At the textual level, the clause sequences create an explicit logic: *proposition* (interest from clubs) → *evidence* (their presence) → *testability* (clubs can be asked), so readers need not supply missing links. Moving to discursive practice, that tight evidential chain instructs other journalists and followers how the update should circulate: as information that invites verification, not as rumour to be amplified uncritically. In Fairclough's terms, coherence here is more than tidy writing; it is a resource for signalling alignment with the field's hegemonic norms of accuracy, transparency and accountability.

Seen from the social-practice layer, this coherent, evidence-led stance accumulates a form of symbolic capital grounded in epistemic trust rather than follower counts. It therefore functions as a strategic counter-move to the platform incentive structure that rewards speed, spectacle and loosely sourced speculation. By making coherence an organising principle of his discourse, Farzam not only upholds core journalistic values but also exposes, and quietly resists, the legitimacy claims of influencer-driven transfer reporting.

This emphasis on verification is not limited to textual construction, but extends into the way Farzam builds and maintains his professional ecosystem. A central component of his legitimacy

lies in his long-term cultivation of sources. He describes having "30 people in Denmark, maybe a few more," whom he trusts implicitly due to their positional authority: "*It's literally the buying club's head or something like that*" (appx. 1, p. 2). These connections form a dense web of interpersonal trust and professional access, reinforcing the depth and credibility of his reporting. By foregrounding these insider relationships, Farzam enacts Carvalho's discursive strategy of positioning, that aligns the speaker with particular actors and institutions to signal legitimacy. In doing so, he presents himself as an integrated figure within the institutional infrastructure of football journalism - as someone whose authority is enacted through durable, reciprocal ties rather than digital reach. His self-representation here is pragmatic and grounded, signalling a form of legitimacy that emerges not from personal branding, but from embeddedness in a network of credible informants.

Although Farzam begins by labelling himself "somewhere in-between" the digital and the traditional, almost every subsequent answer re-inscribes a fundamentally traditional professional identity. He stresses physical beat-work: "*I'm still often at stadiums… I cover matches like all my colleagues*" (appx. 1, p. 1), and elevates verification over speed, insisting he never publishes on "circumstantial evidence" and always double-checks a tip with the opposite party before going to print. His deference to classic editorial gatekeeping is explicit ("*The old gatekeepers still have power? 'Yes, for sure… you can't just write whatever you want*'") (appx. 1, p. 5), and he draws a sharp boundary between journalism and what he calls Fabrizio Romano's "influencer" model, which in his view "crosses every ethical line" (appx. 1, p. 5). Even his social-media practice is framed in institutional rather than personal-brand terms: Twitter is used primarily to funnel readers to tipsbladet.dk, not to cultivate a multi-platform persona, and he flatly rejects expanding to Instagram, TikTok, or Facebook because "he can't handle more" and sees no journalistic value in it (appx. 1, p. 4). Taken together, these patterns suggest that Farzam's professed hybridity functions mainly as a rhetorical concession; in practice he continues to measure his work against the norms, safeguards and collective credibility of traditional newsroom culture.

Verification and the Ethics of Accuracy

Verification emerges in the interview not only as a methodological principle but as a modality move that claims authority. Farzam's statement "*I don't write based on circumstantial evidence. I never write more than what we actually know*" (appx. 1, pp. 2–3), packs multiple high-certainty, subjective modality markers: the first-person pronoun ("I"), the absolute negation ("never") and the epistemic verb of certainty ("know"). In Fairclough's terms, these choices push his proposition to the top end of the certainty scale and foreground the reporter's personal accountability for truth claims. Within the discursive practice of transfer reporting, such high-modality language re-contextualises the institutional value of verification as a genre marker of legitimacy, distinguishing Farzam's discourse from the tentative, rumour-laden updates typical of platform-native influencers.

At the level of discursive practice Farzam draws on routines historically tied to legacy newsrooms (multi-source corroboration, on-record confirmation) and recontextualizes them within the rapid-fire, platform-native format of transfer updates. By foregrounding verification in the very claim that launches each story, he hybridises two discourses: the institutionally sanctioned one of accuracy and the platform logic of speed and personal branding. Fairclough's framework thus helps us see how Farzam is not merely echoing a professional norm; he is strategically selecting and reshaping that norm to negotiate legitimacy in a space where influence is measured in clicks and follows rather than masthead prestige. In short, applying Fairclough illuminates how the ethic of verification is enacted and remodelled, rather than simply confirming that it exists.

His legitimacy is further reinforced by his methodological rigor. Farzam emphasizes that he verifies every story before publication, by getting it confirmed from various sources, independently of each other: "*Every time a source gives me a story, I say 'thank you', and then I contact the counterpart*" (appx. 1, p. 2). This routine aligns closely with Fairclough's notion of discursive practice, where the process of text production and validation is shaped by institutional expectations. Moreover, he identifies a specific threshold for truth: "*I always get the story confirmed. And then I run with it*" (appx. 1, p. 2) This evidences a discursive commitment to verification and epistemological stability in a field increasingly marked by speculation and speed.

Rather than relying on ambiguous phrases like “reportedly” or “is believed to,” Farzam insists that all details in his reporting be anchored in facts that can be independently confirmed. He deliberately avoids indirect language, explaining that stories must be constructed in a way that allows others to verify them directly with the involved parties. While this approach reinforces textual coherence, its deeper significance lies in the ethical framework it reveals: for Farzam, the journalist must accept full accountability for the truth-value of their reporting. This is not only a matter of style but of professional integrity. Farzam casts this as part of his discursive practice: by structuring each update so that it invites external verification and minimises ambiguity, he claims to demonstrate epistemic responsibility, contrasting his own symbolic capital of reliability with what he sees as the more speculative, impressionistic orientation of platform-native transfer news.

A further layer of ethical distinction is revealed when Farzam directly critiques Fabrizio Romano: “*He promotes agents and clubs etc. That’s where it breaks for me*” (appx. 1, p. 3). The phrase “that’s where it breaks” marks more than just disapproval. It signifies a clear ethical rupture, a moment in which the boundary between journalism and promotion/commercialization is, in Farzam’s view, irreversibly crossed. For him, such behaviour violates the foundational principles of journalism, which should serve the public’s right to truthful, independent information, not the interests of commercial actors. He reinforces this boundary by stating bluntly: “*I would be fired on the spot if I did what he does*” (appx. 1, p. 5). This imagined consequence is telling, as it invokes a system of editorial oversight and accountability that stands in sharp contrast to the autonomy of influencer-based reporting. Where Romano operates largely as a self-directed media brand, Farzam positions himself within an institutional framework where transparency, peer regulation, and professional ethics are non-negotiable. This contrast aligns with Boyle & Rowe’s argument that the field of sports journalism is increasingly shaped by competing modes of legitimacy: one grounded in institutional professionalism, and the other in platform visibility and brand appeal. Farzam’s comments reflect a defence of the former; a model where journalistic credibility depends on maintaining editorial distance from the subjects of reporting. His critique of Romano’s promotional ties reveals not just personal frustration, but a deeper concern about the erosion of journalism’s normative core. Applying Fairclough’s framework, we can see two intertwined layers at work. Within the discursive practice, Farzam’s explicit emphasis on verification reinscribes the hegemonic values of traditional journalism, such as accuracy, legitimacy and transparency, into the routine production and interpretation of his transfer updates. At the level of social practice, that move

challenges the platform-era incentives for rumour-led infotainment and self-branding, positioning verification as a counterforce to the publicity-driven logic now shaping sports-news circulation.

Such reflections underscore the ideological struggle that Boyle & Rowe identify as central to today's journalistic field: the conflict between traditional journalistic values, such as credibility, objectivity, public service, and the demands of platform economies that reward speed, reach, and viral potential. Farzam, by drawing rigid ethical lines, resists this transformation. His insistence that stories must serve the truth and not the agenda of agents or clubs, situates him within a professional paradigm where journalism's social function is preserved, even as new actors attempt to redefine it.

Additionally, Farzam's preference for long-term, trustworthy sources - those "30 people in Denmark" he has "cultivated over time" - illustrates a relational model of legitimacy, built on consistency, mutual respect, and historical reliability. This directly contrasts with the transactional or opportunistic sourcing often associated with influencer reporting. This also demonstrates how symbolic capital continues to play a key role in how authority is distributed within traditional journalistic institutions. In Farzam's case, this symbolic capital does not stem from social media reach or personal branding, but rather from long-term relationships with trusted sources and a proven track record of accurate reporting. His reputation is sustained through trust networks, being his ongoing collaborations with reliable informants, and institutional memory, meaning the accumulated knowledge, credibility, and professional standing he has built over time within a recognised editorial framework. In this way, Farzam's authority is less about visibility and more about recognition by peers, editors, and sources who value his consistency and integrity. This stands in contrast to newer models of journalistic legitimacy, where symbolic capital is often measured through metrics like follower count or platform virality.

Positioning Against the Influencer Paradigm

Farzam's response to being dubbed "the Danish Fabrizio Romano" provides a revealing case of discursive boundary-making. When asked what he thinks of the comparison, he explains: "*It's double-edged, you know? I think many people mean it well, because they think he's the best transfer journalist in the world. But I've always said: I'm just Farzam. I don't want to be*

anyone else. Because I believe I have way more credibility than him" (appx. 1, p. 3). This comment is not merely a modest refusal. It is a strategic act of positioning, in which Farzam constructs his own identity in direct opposition to a more visible but, in his view, less credible counterpart. While public discourse may associate him with Romano due to their shared focus on transfer news, Farzam clearly distances himself from the influencer persona. His reference to having "way more credibility" signals that, for him, journalistic legitimacy is not determined by visibility, reach, or fame, but by adherence to professional standards such as verification, independence, and editorial integrity.

In this moment, Farzam reasserts a professional identity grounded in traditional journalism, where credibility is earned through ethical conduct and trust within institutional frameworks, and not through personal branding or follower counts. The comparison to Romano therefore becomes a rhetorical tool: by rejecting the label, Farzam draws a sharp boundary between what he considers real journalism and the influencer model he critiques. His self-positioning reflects a broader ideological struggle within sports media, as legacy norms of professionalism are increasingly challenged by new, platform-native models of authority.

He reinforces this distinction unequivocally, when revealing his view on Roman: "*In my eyes, he's not a journalist. He's an influencer*" (appx. 1, p. 5). Rather than describing an objective truth, Farzam uses this distinction to actively reproduce a particular understanding of the field he inhabits. In Fairclough's terms, such utterances are part of discourse as social practice, shaping how roles, boundaries, and hierarchies are understood and maintained. The formulation "in my eyes" also signals a subjective yet authoritative stance, emphasising Farzam's own position within a contested field. By asserting this binary, he not only rejects Romano's classification but contributes to the broader discursive formation of professional categories - a process through which legitimacy is symbolically distributed or withheld.

These remarks place Farzam within a broader discursive effort to define the boundaries of journalism. As journalistic authority becomes increasingly fragmented in the platform era, Farzam's rejection of the influencer label operates not merely as a personal preference but as a symbolic intervention into how journalistic roles are understood. In Fairclough's terms, this is an instance of discourse functioning as social practice, where language is used to actively shape professional meaning and institutional norms. His statement is not simply descriptive; it is normative, seeking to establish who qualifies as a legitimate actor within the field. By naming

Romano an influencer, Farzam positions himself in contrast and, in doing so, contributes to the ongoing contestation of what journalism is, and who gets to claim that identity.

Perhaps the most illustrative moment comes when he recounts being sidelined from various stories, because "the player wants to be promoted through Fabrizio" (appx. 1, p. 3), i.e. the sources give their story to Romano instead of to Farzam, because he has a bigger reach. The use of "promoted" here is revealing: it implies not the dissemination of independently verified news, but the strategic placement of content aimed at boosting personal exposure. In this context, visibility itself becomes a transactional asset, as something that players or agents actively seek by aligning with high-reach figures like Romano. As Hutchins & Rowe argue, symbolic power in contemporary sports journalism is increasingly linked to digital audience reach rather than editorial authority. This shift also illustrates commodification: the process through which communicative acts and journalistic discourse are restructured according to market logic. In this case, the act of "being promoted" via a social media figure is not just about visibility, but about turning information into a tool for brand management and strategic positioning within the sports industry. The player's decision to bypass Farzam in favour of Romano therefore reflects a broader transformation in journalistic authority, from public service to platform performance, and from editorial validation to algorithmic exposure. This also aligns with Rowe's notion that the relationship between sporting organizations and media organizations involves mutually beneficial interdependency (Rowe, 2004, p. 53), in the sense that the sports organization (i.e. the club, agent, player, etc.) benefits from the extra exposure of the player, whilst the media organization (i.e. Fabrizio Romano) benefits by bringing the story.

Farzam's response to being left out in favour of Fabrizio, is simply "*It's not a battle I fight*" (appx. 1, p. 4). This reflects both ethical restraint and structural resignation. He recognizes the symbolic power Romano holds, particularly with younger players who "think it's really cool to be published by him" (appx. 1, p. 3). But instead of adapting to influencer tactics, Farzam reinforces his own standards: "*I don't have an open Instagram profile. I don't need more platforms. I can't handle more*" (appx. 1, p. 4). By deliberately limiting himself to a smaller set of channels, where he can maintain fuller context and rigorous fact-checking, he's rejecting the usual impulse to slice or sensationalize stories purely for platform engagement. In that sense, his minimal platform use isn't a sign of weakness but an act of resistance: rather than "creatively cannibalize" his own work to chase algorithmic favour, he upholds editorial discipline

by keeping the reporting process intact and transparent. In other words, Farzam's stance illustrates the opposite of creative cannibalism; he actively guards against converting his journalism into click-bait fodder for feeds.

Farzam's defence of professional standards and editorial accountability can also be read as a reaction to the rise of citizen sports journalism. When he insists, "*I don't write interest-driven stories*" and "*I would be fired on the spot if I did what he does*" (appx. 1, pp. 1, 5), he deploys high-certainty, subjective modality. The categorical "don't" pushes his stance to the top end of the certainty scale while foregrounding personal accountability; the conditional "would … if" projects an institutional sanction, signalling that the newsroom, not merely Farzam, draws a hard line between verified reporting and audience-baiting speculation.

Read through Fairclough's middle layer of discursive practice, these rule-oriented modality choices do the work of boundary maintenance: they invite readers to recognise verification as a professional norm and to contrast it with the looser, platform-native routines of fan influencers and freelance scoop-hunters. At the social-practice level, the same modality pattern defends the hegemonic capital of institutional legitimacy - accuracy, accountability and editorial oversight - against a media economy that increasingly rewards visibility and speed over verifiability. In this way, Farzam's discourse functions as an active shield for the professional field, resisting the encroachment of citizen-led, influencer-driven alternatives and reasserting journalistic authority within the platform era.

Farzam's verification talk therefore performs a double move of legitimacy. On the one hand, his high-certainty, first-person modality ("I don't… ", "I never… ") positions him squarely inside the hegemonic journalistic norms of accuracy, transparency and editorial oversight. On the other hand, by repeatedly contrasting his own procedures with "what he does" in reference to Fabrizio Romano, Farzam implicitly de-legitimises the influencer model as speculative and interest-driven. The same linguistic choices that elevate his symbolic capital of reliability simultaneously cast doubt on Romano's, turning modality into a boundary tool that both secures the reporter's professional footing and pushes the rival practice to the margins of journalistic legitimacy.

Farzam repeatedly frames his statements with short orientation phrases, like "one can say…", "first of all…", and often closes a turn by asking whether the interviewer "follows" his point. These brief departures from propositional content work as metadiscourse: they tell the listener

how to hear what comes next and invite explicit confirmation that the meaning has landed. In the absence of a newsroom masthead, such real-time framing becomes an "on-the-fly accreditation system," reinforcing the verification ethic that anchors his credibility.

The same concern for auditability shapes the very structure of his examples. When he recounts a recent scoop, he first states that club officials were physically at the stadium - classic investigative diction - then adds that "any journalist can call the club and check" (Appendix 1, p. 2). This single sentence blends the language of investigative reporting with the peer-to-peer Q-and-A style of social media, an instance of interdiscursivity that lets him oscillate between reporter, audience helper and collegial coach. By fusing genres in this way, Farzam shows how platform routines can soften the boundary between hard-news discourse and conversational banter while still defending institutional norms of verification.

Recognition, Struggle, and Symbolic Authority

Though Farzam operates within a digital landscape, he carefully controls how he engages with its demands. His primary journalistic output consists of full-length articles written for the Danish sports media outlet Tipsbladet. These articles are researched, edited, and published through traditional editorial processes, reflecting a workflow rooted in institutional norms. After publication, Farzam shares the articles on his personal Twitter (X) account, typically accompanied by a short summary or headline and a direct link to the original piece on Tipsbladet's website. When asked whether this is done primarily to direct traffic to the platform or to highlight his own authorship, he responds: "*It's really a bit of both. I'll admit it also means something for one's image and one's work that you can be proud of having broken a story. But first and foremost, I do it because it brings a lot of readers to my workplace*" (appx. 1, p. 6). This reflects a clear understanding of social media not as a space for self-promotion or personal branding, but as a tool for distributing institutionally produced content. His presence on the platform is deliberate and designed to support his editorial work rather than cultivate a personal media persona.

This practice illustrates how Farzam uses platform infrastructure to support editorial rather than personal goals. While many sports media actors now tailor their output for algorithmic visibil-

ity, Farzam's digital footprint remains closely tied to the institutional setting in which his journalism is embedded. His aim is not to maximise personal exposure, but to deliver visibility and readership to the media outlet he represents. This orientation stands in contrast to emerging models of platform-native journalism, where authority often derives from individual reach and brand identity. Farzam resists the logic whereby symbolic power is concentrated in digitally prominent individuals. Instead, he reinforces an older, institutionally grounded form of credibility, where legitimacy flows from editorial quality rather than platform performance.

Still, Farzam is highly aware of the pressures of digital visibility. He notes: "*Especially young players think it's really cool to be featured by him* [Romano]" (appx. 1, p. 3). This seemingly casual remark captures a deeper generational shift in how authority is perceived within sports media. For many younger athletes - the generation that Hutchins & Rowe refer to as 'digital natives' journalistic value is not necessarily tied to editorial processes or institutional verification, but to visibility, reach, and cultural relevance on social platforms. In this context, being "featured" by a prominent figure like Romano carries symbolic weight that may exceed traditional media coverage. For Farzam, this trend signifies more than a change in media habits; it marks a redefinition of what counts as truth, authority, and relevance within the evolving media economy.

Farzam's stance also reflects Fairclough's understanding of discourse as a site where dominant ideologies are both reproduced and contested. His reporting is not neutral or passive; it involves continuous decisions about what to report, how to frame it, and which platforms to use, all of which contribute to shaping the meaning of journalism itself. These discursive practices are shaped by broader media structures, such as the rise of platform logics and audience-driven visibility, but they also serve to push back against those structures by reaffirming traditional norms of verification, institutional loyalty, and editorial transparency. In this sense, Farzam's professional identity becomes a communicative intervention: not just a refusal to follow the influencer model, but an active effort to reassert what counts as credible journalism in a media landscape where those norms are increasingly blurred and contested. His approach illustrates how even small, individual acts of reporting can participate in larger ideological negotiations about the role, value, and definition of journalism today.

One of the more implicit but important themes in Farzam's discourse is the emotional toll of maintaining professional integrity in an increasingly competitive and ambiguous media environment. "*There's a lot of jealousy in my field*," he states, referring to the backlash he receives

from colleagues who resent his success in breaking stories (appx. 1, p. 4). This reveals not only the competitive nature of contemporary sports journalism, but also the interpersonal strain involved in defending professional values in an industry where institutional loyalty is no longer the default. His experience shows that symbolic capital is now contested and recalibrated in more public, volatile spaces such as social media, where peer recognition and audience perception collide.

His recounting of the Ibrahim Osman (Ivorian former FC Nordsjælland player who moved to Brighton) case is particularly revealing. Farzam recalls being the only journalist to report that the West Ham transfer had collapsed, while all the big journalists - Romano included - continued to push a different story: "*I stood up against all of them on Twitter. And I think I earned the respect of Danish readers*" (appx. 1, p. 5). This anecdote is more than a professional victory. It's a discursive performance of re-legitimation. By publicly resisting consensus and being vindicated, Farzam enacts what Carvalho might term a repositioning: a shift in status not achieved through institutional promotion, but through moral authority and evidentiary truth. In that moment, his authority was not just editorial, but symbolic, and grounded in public recognition of courage, correctness, and independence.

Importantly, this narrative also underscores how journalistic authority must now be defended not only against misinformation or algorithmic noise, but against fellow professionals operating within diverging norms. The legitimacy Farzam gains is therefore not just top-down (from editors or institutions), but horizontal and public, negotiated through transparent confrontation with peers in shared discursive arenas like Twitter. His story thus becomes a counter-narrative: a demonstration that traditional journalistic practices, when upheld and performed with clarity, can still command respect, even within a media culture dominated by speed, spectacle, and self-promotion.

Preliminary Conclusion

Overall, Farzam Abolhosseini's discourse offers a robust defence of traditional journalistic values. such as credibility, verification, institutional affiliation, and ethical restraint. Although he explicitly describes himself as straddling both traditional and digital modes of reporting, his emphasis on double-sourcing and newsroom oversight makes it clear that, in practice, he

leans toward the former. His professional identity is constructed through explicit boundary-drawing, a commitment to public service, and a reliance on peer-based legitimacy within the newsroom. By positioning himself in opposition to influencer models of reporting, he reaffirms the normative function of journalism in a media field increasingly driven by commercial agendas. Farzam's discourse reflects the persistence of an institutional paradigm, where legitimacy is conferred through editorial systems and collective accountability. His case provides a critical counterweight to Romano's platform-centred model, and thus grounds the thesis in the fundamental tensions shaping sports journalism today.

Fabrizio Romano Interview

Constructing a Digital Journalistic Identity

Fabrizio Romano's self-presentation throughout the interview reveals a hybrid identity that blends journalistic tradition with digital-native logic. He opens the interview by stating clearly: "*I'm Fabrizio Romano, I'm a football journalist*" (appx. 2, p. 1), affirming his identification with the profession. This insistence on journalistic identity can be read as part of a broader struggle over the boundaries of the profession in the platform era, where legitimacy is no longer exclusively conferred by institutions but must also be constructed discursively and performatively in public space. Despite his extraordinary digital reach, and his lack of an actual journalistic education, Romano consistently refers to himself not as an influencer or media personality, but as a journalist. His first professional steps were also digital: "*My first experience as a football journalist was on a very small website in Italy*" (appx. 2, p. 1). From the beginning, Romano's trajectory was rooted in digital spaces, as he began writing for a small online website. However, he notes that when he entered the field, traditional media still defined the dominant pathways into journalism: "*When I started it was more traditional journalism, so you had opportunities on newspaper, radio and TV. Now, with social media, you really have many opportunities, many stages, where you can show your talent*" (appx. 2, p. 8). This reflects both a generational transition and Romano's awareness of how the structures around him were shifting, even if he was already working outside them. Implicitly, he positions himself as a forerun-

ner of this broader paradigm shift: someone who began working digitally in a media environment still dominated by traditional norms, and who helped carve out the very path that others would later follow.

Romano locates the starting point of his career in a scoop he broke about Argentinian striker Mauro Icardi moving from Barcelona to Italian side Sampdoria in 2011: "*That moment when I broke the story of Mauro Icardi was really important, not just for the reaction of the people in the social media world or traditional journalism, but also for myself. I really had the feeling like, 'OK, I want to be a football journalist and I want to work on the transfer market'"* (appx. 2, p. 2). He adds, "*you can be a traditional journalist on newspapers or you can be a traditional journalist in TV, there are many ways to be a football journalist. But I understood in that moment that I really wanted to cover transfer stories*" (appx. 2, p. 2). This distinction highlights his conscious navigation between journalistic forms. Rather than inheriting a role, he actively shapes his identity in response to the affordances of digital media. This supports Hutchins & Rowe's notion of the digital native-actors whose practices are inherently shaped by networked technologies rather than inherited from traditional journalistic institutions. Digital natives are not merely users of online platforms; they are embedded in a media logic that values immediacy, interactivity, and constant presence. In this context, Romano's career is emblematic: his journalistic identity, workflow, and legitimacy have all developed within, and in response to, the affordances and pressures of the digital environment. His habits of self-publishing, platform optimization, and audience engagement are not adaptations to a changing industry; they are foundational to how he operates as a journalist.

At the same time, Romano does not fully reject the normative expectations of journalism. He draws sharp boundaries between what he does and what a "content creator" does, when he explains that he's personally responsible for all of his posts on social media: "*they deserve to have every single word directly from myself and not from someone else, because [reporting] the news is not like [being] a content creator. In that case, you have to be a journalist and the journalist has to report every single word in the correct way*" (appx. 2, p. 9). This is a moment of explicit legitimation, where Romano discursively justifies his status by drawing on normative ideas of journalistic precision, authorship, and responsibility. His assertion that his followers deserve to have every single word directly from him reinforces his personal commitment to accuracy, despite the informality of the medium. In doing so, Romano attempts to reconcile journalistic norms with the affordances of the platform.

The above quote works linguistically through modality: its double use of "have to" is a doubled deontic construction that pushes obligation to the top of Fairclough's modality scale. This choice performs two intertwined moves. First, it universalises the norm: accuracy is cast as a categorical duty that binds any practitioner rather than a personal preference. Second, by echoing the modal in both halves of the sentence ("you have to … the journalist has to …"), Romano turns a piece of advice aimed at influencers into an impersonal field rule, collapsing the distance between individual workflow and professional doctrine. In Fairclough's terms, that shift re-keys a private practice into an institutional expectation, thereby legitimising Romano's authority while implicitly framing looser, summary-style reporting as a lapse in journalistic responsibility. The high-certainty modality thus operates as a boundary marker separating his self-styled professionalism from the platform's wider culture of rapid content creation.

Furthermore, his comments illustrate that his professional identity is not imposed from above, but constructed in real time through digital practice, audience interaction, and self-discipline. He becomes a paradigmatic case of what Hutchins & Rowe describe as a "digitally native" sports media actor - someone whose legitimacy emerges not from institutional status, but through continuous discursive performance and audience validation within a constantly moving digital ecology.

Generally, Romano's speech is saturated with boosters and audience imperatives that frame information before it lands: "trust me, the biggest stories I had…", "believe me", "imagine the shock…". These tags function as metadiscourse, stamping each claim with his personal guarantee and turning raw facts into shared drama. On a platform where editorial vetting is absent, the frequency of such self-authorising cues supplies the accreditation normally provided by sub-editors or mastheads.

Romano's trademark "Here We Go" adds another layer to this self-branding. What began as an off-the-cuff tweet has hardened into a confirmation stamp that fans now expect for every marquee transfer. By fusing the terse certainty of a wire-service headline with the upbeat cadence of advertising copy, the phrase performs a clear act of interdiscursivity: it recasts a routine fact as a share-worthy spectacle. Through this hybrid discourse Romano straddles the roles of reporter, showman, and brand steward, demonstrating how platform logic stretches traditional professional boundaries while rewarding visibility as a form of journalistic capital.

Platform Integrity: Romano's Discursive Ethics of Journalism

Romano repeatedly legitimises his work through references to access, exclusivity, and a deeply personalised ethics of interaction. His claim to authority is built not through institutional affiliation, but through proximity to sources: "*Starting from that day [when he broke the story of Mauro Icardi], I started spending like 6–7 years around the streets in Milan, outside hotels, restaurants, or whatever, to get in touch with people, to get in touch with agents, presidents, players, or whoever was involved in the football industry to create some contact, to build my network*" (appx. 2, p. 3). While institutional journalists also rely on personal networks, their access is often facilitated, or at least legitimised, by their affiliation with recognised media outlets. In contrast, Romano constructs access independently, relying on interpersonal hustle and persistent face-to-face presence in key physical spaces, without the structural support of a newsroom

This practice reflects a shift in how symbolic capital is accumulated in the field of sports journalism. Whereas traditional legitimacy might be secured through affiliation with respected institutions, Romano builds credibility through personal connections and the cultivation of an exclusive network. In Bourdieu's terms, this is symbolic capital grounded not in institutional prestige, but in relational capital, in credibility earned through trust, repetition, and perceived insider access. His authority stems not from the brand of a media outlet, but from the density of his personal network.

Moreover, Romano's narration of his labour itself functions as a Faircloughian social practice: by telling a story of relentless effort, dedication, and deep immersion, he is actively shaping how his role is understood within the field. Rather than presenting himself as someone "granted" a platform, he frames himself as having earned every opportunity through presence and persistence. In doing so, he uses discourse to legitimize his status, exactly as Carvalho describes, because he not only recounts how he arrived here but also constructs that journey as inherently valid and credible within journalistic norms.

Going back to his cultivated network, this is central to how he explains the ethics of his reporting. He repeatedly frames his decisions in terms of "respect", a word he uses to structure

multiple relationships: with sources, timing, and the audience. "*Respect your sources, respect your friends and remember that if you want to be in the industry long term, it's always crucial to be respectful with all the people involved in the stories*" (appx. 2, p. 4). Later, he extends this idea to editorial restraint: "*You need to make sure that everyone [involved in the story] is aware of what you're going to post in social media, if you want to be long-term in the industry, and I always want to be respectful*" (appx. 2, p. 5). Here, legitimation occurs through a relational ethics, as Romano appeals not to institutional codes of conduct but to interpersonal accountability and emotional awareness. This is significant in relation to the project's overarching research question: it illustrates how Romano justifies his journalistic legitimacy in the absence of institutional affiliation by substituting formal structures with informal, discursively enacted norms of conduct. His repeated emphasis on respect serves as an alternative form of gatekeeping and professional accountability in the context of a platform-driven news environment, which highlights the paradigm shift from institutionally grounded journalism to influencer-centred authority. Additionally, he uses modality to turn politeness into a rule. "Need to" signals firm obligation, shifting the act of alerting sources from courtesy to requirement. In Fairclough's discursive-practice layer, the modal "need to" turns respect for sources into a rule, positioning that courtesy as a prerequisite for Romano's authority.

Timing is another key domain through which Romano constructs his legitimacy and ethical stance. He explains that in many cases, journalistic value lies in immediacy: "*it's just about trusting your source, publish, and be fast, because being fast is really important"* (appx. 2, p. 5). This quote underscores how deeply Romano's practices are embedded in the temporal demands of the platform economy, where visibility and relevance are tied to speed. However, Romano's choice in the case of German football Toni Kroos, enacts journalistic discursive practices by balancing platform incentives against ethical norms: "*I knew that Toni Kroos was going to retire (...) but respect also means that in some moments it's the player who wants to communicate and you have to respect that always*" (appx. 2, p. 7). By withholding the scoop out of deference to Kroos's own timing, he isn't merely reflecting external pressures; he is performing discourse as social practice. In Fairclough's terms, Romano's decision both shapes and is shaped by moral expectations, embedding respect and restraint into the very act of reporting and thus justifying his path as valid within the journalistic field.

This balancing act between being first and being respectful reveals Romano's ongoing attempt to legitimize himself, not merely through accuracy or exclusivity, but through interpersonal

discretion and ethical timing. Rather than adhering to a formal editorial code, Romano invokes a personalised, relational ethic that he performs discursively through stories like this. His restraint in the Kroos case functions as a form of legitimation, reinforcing his image as someone who respects the human dimensions of reporting even within the hyper-accelerated logic of social media. In doing so, he demonstrates how journalistic credibility can be discursively sustained in a space where traditional mechanisms of accountability are absent.

Romano's own words "*When you are powerful on social media, it can happen that if you break the story too early, it can create a problem to the negotiation itself*" (appx. 2, p. 7), demonstrate how his reporting choices actively perform a social practice: he negotiates platform-driven imperatives against real-world consequences. By framing the dilemma in terms of "being fast, but also respectful," he doesn't simply describe external pressures; he enacts them, using personal ethics and relational judgment to decide "when not to post." His self-imposed responsibility - rather than invoking any formal editorial or institutional gatekeeping - illustrates how his communicative acts both emerge from and reshape the broader social structures of contemporary sports journalism. This is especially important given the absence of institutional oversight. Romano must negotiate legitimacy within the system that privileges speed, while still signalling that he exercises restraint. In this sense, his timing is not just strategic; it becomes part of how he discursively manages his own influence. By acknowledging that his posts can actively shape real-world negotiations, Romano frames his responsibility in terms of relational awareness rather than institutional oversight. This reinforces his legitimacy by positioning him as a self-regulating actor, i.e. someone who understands the weight of his digital visibility and adapts his communicative practice accordingly.

The quote above uses the modal verb "can" twice with an impersonal subject, marking what Fairclough calls objective modality: a risk is presented as a general possibility in the world rather than as Romano's private judgement. By shifting from earlier, high-obligation forms ("have to," "need to") to this softer, objective possibility, Romano acknowledges that premature publication may jeopardise negotiations while maintaining that the danger is situational, not inevitable. The change in modality lets him balance the platform's speed imperative with a visible ethic of caution, portraying himself as both fast and responsible.

Beyond acknowledging the possibility of error through objective modality, Romano goes further by openly admitting that mistakes do occur in the rush to publish. His candid admission "*I*

reported many times incorrect things, it happens, absolutely" (appx 2, p. 7), reveals how the platform imperative for immediacy can collide with accuracy. As Hutchins & Rowe argue, online media are characterized as engaging in the activity of attention grabbing rather than simply providing sports news (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012, p. 142). In admitting his own mistakes, Romano implicitly acknowledges that the drive to break stories quickly sometimes outpaces the slower process of verification. This tension exemplifies the attention-grabbing logic: rather than waiting for full confirmation, the pressure to "be first" can lead to errors, which the platform then amplifies. By framing his missteps as a by-product of the medium, Romano normalizes a trade-off between speed and precision. In doing so, he positions himself as aware of the risks inherent in influencer-style reporting, even as he continues to leverage rapid, high-visibility updates to maintain credibility and audience engagement.

Platform Performance and the Branding of Authority

Fabrizio Romano's identity is inextricable from his social media visibility. With over 60 million followers across social channels, he has built a journalistic brand that operates independently of institutional frameworks. His authority stems not from a news outlet, but from audience recognition, symbolic catchphrases, and his ability to dominate the digital space through speed, consistency, and personal authorship.

Romano attributes part of his success to "obsession" (appx. 2, p. 4), and describes himself working without days off and under immense pressure. However, this intense labour is not just a sign of work ethic, it's also a performative signal of legitimacy within a media economy that rewards constant presence. His workload becomes part of his brand identity, reinforcing Boyle and Rowe's point that digital journalism is increasingly shaped by branding, commercial visibility, and audience interaction, rather than traditional institutional structures (Boyle & Rowe, 2023, p. 5).

A central element of Romano's brand is his now-iconic catchphrase "Here We Go," which originated informally, but quickly became a recurring signal that a transfer deal was imminent and credible. He explains that it was not something he planned. It became part of his work because people loved it (appx. 2, p. 10). What began as a spontaneous expression evolved into a recognisable discursive marker, that condenses complex reporting into a short, emotionally

charged phrase. This illustrates a reciprocal dynamic between journalist and audience, where the journalist's language becomes shaped by audience expectation and social media response. Rather than being imposed editorially, “Here We Go” emerged through real-time interaction, becoming part of the way Romano maintains visibility, connection, and perceived authority.

In Fairclough’s terms, this can be understood as an example of commodification: journalistic language reconfigured as a symbolic product optimised for consumption, circulation, and emotional appeal. “Here We Go” operates not merely as a linguistic device, but as a branded moment, and a marketable shorthand for certainty, excitement, and access. Its power lies in its repetition and recognisability: followers know what it means, anticipate it, and even demand it. This turns journalism into a performative event, where the value of the story is not just in the information it conveys, but in how it is packaged and experienced. In this sense, “Here We Go” is not just a phrase; it's part of the platform-driven transformation of journalism into a product tailored to audience engagement and shareability.

This form of branding also intersects with Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic capital. Romano’s authority is no longer anchored in institutional credibility but in accumulated public recognition, measured in followers, retweets, and the viral uptake of his language by the broader football public. A striking example of this appears when he reflects on reporting Cristiano Ronaldo’s return to Manchester United: “*There were like 98,000 people following the live stream (...) There’s more people watching me from my home reporting on a story, than people at Camp Nou for a Barcelona game*” (appx. 2, p. 11). Here, Romano does not simply report the story, he stages it. The event becomes not just a piece of news, but a moment of mediated performance, with Romano positioned at the centre of attention. This illustrates the shift away from institutionally conferred legitimacy to a form of journalistic capital grounded in personal visibility and direct audience engagement. It reflects what Boyle & Rowe describe as an “ongoing battle for control over sports content and the narratives that surround it,” often shaped by commercial and branding dynamics (Boyle & Rowe, 2023, p. 5). In this context, Romano’s social media presence functions not as a supplement to journalism, but as the primary terrain on which legitimacy is constructed and contested.

Finally, Romano’s presence across multiple platforms, including X, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitch, positions him as a textbook example of Hutchins & Rowe's term of creative cannibalism. He is not only a reporter of transfer news, but also a producer of content

cycles that sustain his brand and feed the broader football media ecosystem. His now-iconic catchphrase “Here We Go” functions not just as a reporting cue but as a piece of viral shorthand repackaged across social media, memes, merchandise, and fan discourse. Romano, in this sense, doesn’t just deliver news - he becomes news, circulating himself as a product within the platform economy. This self-referential loop reflects a key dimension of digital sports journalism, where personal visibility must be constantly regenerated through emotionally charged, easily shareable content.

Emotional Labour and the Pressure of Visibility

While Fabrizio Romano often frames his work around passion and energy, he also highlights the intensity and exhaustion that define his professional life. “*My average working day is basically every single minute of the day*,” he explains, adding, “*football is my love. Transfer is my love*” (appx. 2, p. 8). These statements do more than describe his lived experience, they enact a social practice by tying legitimacy directly to emotional investment and constant availability. By presenting personal sacrifice as proof of credibility, Romano isn’t merely reflecting a shift toward platform-centred journalism; he is performing it. In Fairclough’s terms, his language both emerges from and reshapes the broader social structures of contemporary sports reporting, illustrating how discourse can actively construct a new paradigm where dedication and uninterrupted presence become the core markers of trustworthiness. Additionally, by emphasising passion, workload, and individual sacrifice, Romano uses Carvalho's term of legitimation, by justifying his professional status not through formal credentials, but through the narrative of relentless labour within a platform-driven field.

But the strain of this visibility-driven routine is also part of Romano’s self-legitimation. During the transfer window, he works “*17–18 hours daily. It was 19 actually on deadline day* [the day where the transfer window closes]” (appx. 2, p. 9), describing a non-stop cycle of updates, calls, messages, and output. These demands are intensified by his insistence on personal authorship: “*I spend the entire day sending messages, calling people, sending emails, checking social media, posting on social media because everything I post is by myself*” (appx. 2, p. 9). This labour is not merely logistical; it becomes part of the way Romano constructs his professional legitimacy. As Carvalho notes, legitimation involves discursively justifying one's power

or status, and here Romano does so by highlighting his extreme workload and individual accountability. At the same time, this reflects Fairclough's idea of discursive practice: Romano's language is shaped by the platform environment he operates in, where constant presence and direct authorship are valued. His symbolic capital, in Bourdieu's sense, is not derived from institutional recognition, but from public perception of his dedication, speed, and availability, which are traits that define authority in a platform-driven media ecology.

Importantly, Romano's emotional labour is closely tied to the visibility demands of platform-based journalism. He reflects on the mental and physical toll: "*They don't know that you are working 20 hours per day. Again, I'm lucky because it's in the football industry, but it's still a hard work to do with a lot of pressure*" (appx. 2, p. 7). This is not just a personal complaint, it's part of a discursive strategy to justify his authority in a field increasingly shaped by public exposure and constant engagement. As Boyle & Rowe argue, sports journalism is now characterised by an ongoing battle for control over sports content and the narratives that surround it, often driven by branding and individual visibility. Romano's self-representation as exhausted yet always active positions him within this battle, where journalistic legitimacy is earned not through institutional procedures, but through personal endurance and responsiveness. Similarly, Hutchins & Rowe show how the rise of digital platforms has redefined professional norms around speed, reach, and presence. These are all pressures that Romano not only describes but incorporates into how he performs and communicates his credibility.

This emotional intensity is not peripheral to Romano's legitimacy, it's central to how he constructs his brand in the platform-driven news environment. He does not justify his authority solely through access or accuracy, but through affective engagement and personal endurance. Late in the interview, he acknowledges the long-term toll: "*Probably one day I will say, okay, I'm done. I can't continue with transfers... but not yet. At the moment, I'm still here to figh*t" (appx. 2, p. 11). The quote reveals an awareness of the unsustainable nature of his pace, but by declaring that he continues regardless, Romano positions himself as resilient, committed, and indispensable. This statement becomes part of a discursive strategy of legitimation, where credibility is claimed not through institutional hierarchy, but through perseverance under pressure.

His affective performance also aligns with what Boyle & Rowe describe as a media landscape shaped increasingly by branding and commercial visibility; a space where individual journalists are required to act as enduring public figures, continuously performing their relevance.

Similarly, Hutchins & Rowe emphasise how digital platforms have redefined professional identity around speed, reach, and uninterrupted presence. Romano's emotional labour, i.e. his obsession, exhaustion, and continued "fight", reflects and reproduces these structural pressures. It is not just personal, but symbolic: an embodied form of authority suited to a journalistic field that rewards availability over detachment, and performance over process.

Across the analysis of Fabrizio Romano's discourse, a recurring theme is the displacement of traditional institutional authority by individualised, platform-based forms of legitimacy. Romano's career path, his rhetoric of emotional commitment, and his emphasis on visibility and branding exemplify a broader paradigm shift in sports journalism. This shift involves moving away from editorial structures and professional norms rooted in legacy media, and toward a media ecology where journalistic authority is negotiated through personal performance, audience engagement, and digital recognisability. In this sense, Romano does not merely adapt to the platform economy, he actually symbolises its journalistic logic.

This is illustrated clearly in his quote about 98,000 people watching his livestream. That quote underscores how journalistic authority is now increasingly conferred by public attention and platform-based visibility, not institutional role. His discourse illustrates how platform visibility, symbolic capital, and affective labour have become central components in constructing and justifying legitimacy in the current era.

Generally, this section reveals how emotional labour functions as both a narrative tool and a legitimising strategy in Romano's discourse. The platform-driven economy demands constant engagement, and Romano answers not through institutional security but through personal sacrifice and audience responsiveness. His legitimacy is thus not only professional or discursive, but emotional and earned in part by the willingness to endure the demands of perpetual visibility.

Preliminary Conclusion

Overall, Fabrizio Romano's self-representation and journalistic practices reflect a media environment where visibility, speed, and personal branding increasingly define professional legitimacy. Through the lens of the theories discussed, his discourse reveals how legitimacy is no

longer exclusively tethered to institutional structures but can be produced through constant digital presence, relational ethics, and affective appeal. His emphasis on obsessive dedication, personal authorship, and emotional transparency marks a departure from traditional norms of detachment and institutional oversight. As such, Romano exemplifies the transformation of sports journalism under platform logic: journalism becomes performance, and authority becomes a function of attention, responsiveness, and recognisability. This individualised and platform-optimised model stands in contrast to the institutional ethos defended by Farzam Abolhosseini, and prepares the ground for the comparative synthesis in the final section.

Comparative Analysis

This comparative analysis brings together the two empirical cases explored in this thesis: Danish journalist Farzam Abolhosseini and Italian transfer reporter Fabrizio Romano. Each of these figures represents a distinct model of journalistic authority shaped by different professional contexts, discursive strategies, and relationships to the platform economy. As outlined in the methodological chapter, this comparison is grounded in a qualitative comparative logic, not for the purpose of generalisation, but to reveal how their contrasting approaches reflect deeper structural tensions in the field of sports journalism. Together, their cases offer an empirical response to the central research question: How do two prominent football-transfer reporters - one digital and one traditional - construe and justify their journalistic legitimacy within today's platform-driven news environment, and what does this reveal about the broader paradigm shift from institutional to influencer-centred sports journalism?

Foundations of Legitimacy

At the core of the contrast lies the issue of how journalistic legitimacy is constructed. Farzam Abolhosseini's discourse is embedded in an institutional framework. His authority derives from traditional markers such as peer validation, editorial oversight, and factual integrity. As he explains: "*I don't write interest-driven stories (...) I only write the stories we can verify and stand behind*" (appx. 1, p. 1). This reflects an orientation toward discursive practice in Fairclough's sense, where journalistic outputs are governed by established norms and collective responsibility.

Romano, in contrast, operates largely outside the institutional sphere. His legitimacy is platform-based and individualised, constructed through consistency, visibility, and emotional resonance with his audience. "*If you have the right sources, you can really feel the excitement of people following you, because you are bringing them the truth*" (appx. 2, p. 2). Here, truth is validated not through newsroom consensus, but through affective engagement, thus reinforcing Carvalho's concept of legitimation as a discursive process of justifying one's authority.

This tension is also reflected in how both journalists address speculation and verification. Farzam declares, "*I never write more than what we know*" and adds, "*I do not write based on circumstantial evidence*" (appx. 1, p. 2-3), maintaining a strict threshold for publishable information. In contrast, Romano acknowledges that transfer news can change, but defends the practice of reporting incomplete or evolving information, by stating that those "*who read transfer news every day have to accept that it can change*" (appx. 2, p. 7). These contrasting statements reveal different thresholds for accuracy; one institutional and rigid, the other platform-optimised and flexible.

An intriguing point of discursive divergence lies in how each journalist frames - or fails to frame - the ethical grey zones of their profession. Romano briefly mentions "the dark side of football" (appx. 2, p. 10), referring to how clubs and agents exert control over players and push commercial or financial agendas behind the scenes, but he doesn't spell out exactly who those actors are or how their influence plays out. Farzam, on the other hand, offers a much clearer critique of what he sees as ethically problematic behaviour, and although he never names Romano directly in this context, the implication is difficult to miss. His accusations that Romano "promotes agents and clubs" and acts outside the boundaries of journalistic responsibility (appx. 1, p. 3) suggest that, from Farzam's perspective, Romano himself may be part of the very "dark side" he refers to. This contrast reveals not only differing ethical thresholds, but also different levels of willingness to confront or name problematic practices within the field. Where Romano abstracts and personalises the issue, Farzam anchors it in a critique of systemic promotional logic, that blurs the line between journalism and PR. In this sense, their discourse reflects a deeper clash over what counts as legitimate, ethical reporting in an increasingly commercialised media landscape.

Platform Logic and Branding

The role of platforms is another major point of divergence. Farzam uses Twitter/X mainly to distribute links to his full stories, with the goal of directing traffic to Tipsbladet. "*I do it primarily because it brings a lot of readers to my workplace*" he explains (appx. 1, p. 6). His activity on social media is thus subordinated to institutional goals. He does not attempt to cultivate a personal brand and even distances himself from the influencer model: "*I don't have an open Instagram profile (...) I can't handle more platforms*" (appx. 1, p. 4). This approach reflects a utilitarian relationship to digital tools, where platforms are secondary to the primary task of producing verified, institutionally endorsed journalism.

Romano, by contrast, has fully integrated platform logic into his journalistic identity. His phrase "Here We Go" is not just a verbal tick, but a form of commodification: a branded, emotionally charged shorthand for credibility and excitement. "*It was not planned with a marketing strategy or any agency or anything like that, not at all*" (appx. 2, p. 10), he notes. He decided to keep it because "the reception from the followers was amazing". This is a clear case of symbolic capital in Bourdieu's sense, as Romano's recognisability and affective resonance become sources of authority. His journalism is inseparable from his digital persona, which is cultivated across multiple platforms, such as X, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitch.

This divergence reveals two fundamentally different orientations toward digital media. Farzam treats platforms as distribution tools, a necessary bridge between institutional journalism and the audience. Romano treats platforms as the very architecture of his practice. His posts are not add-ons to a longer article; they are the content itself. This aligns with Hutchins & Rowe's argument that digital media have transformed sports journalism by shifting the locus of authority to online platforms, where immediacy, connectivity, and cross-platform presence shape journalistic practice (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012, p. 126). While Farzam focuses on publishing verified stories through institutional channels, Romano turns the act of reporting into a live, visible performance, thus delivering news in a way that is timed, emotionally charged, and tailored to the dynamics of social media.

Moreover, the two journalists diverge sharply in their relationship to personal branding. Farzam's tone online is minimal and non-performative. He refrains from engaging in debates and emphasises a separation between work and personal life: *"I don't go into long debates (...) I*

have a family. I have stories to write" (appx. 1, p. 6). Romano, on the other hand, sees audience interaction as integral: "*For me the passion for people is crucial, otherwise you can post all the transfer news you want, but at the end, if you don't feel the excitement from the other side, it's going to be boring*" (appx. 2, p. 7). His model of journalism is fundamentally dialogic and responsive, in which the emotional energy of the audience is a condition for legitimacy.

These contrasting models reflect different economies of credibility. Farzam's authority is shaped by institutional affiliation, editorial approval, and peer-based legitimacy. Romano's authority is shaped by personal recognisability, platform performance, and emotional connection. In short, Farzam builds trust for the newsroom; Romano builds trust as the newsroom. Their discursive practices thus expose the paradigm shift this thesis explores, from journalism grounded in editorial institutions to journalism shaped by platform visibility and personal brand.

Emotional Labour and Discursive Self-Positioning

One striking contrast between Farzam and Romano concerns how they understand and talk about recognition and visibility in relation to their legitimacy. Farzam frames recognition as something earned through long-term trust and institutional credibility. He remarks: "*I think I earned the respect of Danish readers*" (appx. 1, p. 5), signalling a model of legitimacy rooted in peer validation and editorial accountability. Respect is not assumed or performed in public - it is gained through consistency, reliability, and professional ethics. In this sense, Farzam aligns closely with the institutional paradigm where credibility is conferred through structures, not spectacle.

Romano, by contrast, links legitimacy directly to audience scale and visibility. Describing the moment he reported Cristiano Ronaldo's transfer, he recalls: "*There were like 98,000 people following the live stream… more people watching me from my home than people at Camp Nou*" (appx. 2, p. 11). This comparison is telling, not just for its dramatic scale, but because Romano uses it to measure professional impact. The validation he seeks is public and numerical; credibility comes from being the centre of attention in a global information stream. In Bourdieu's terms, this is symbolic capital built through visibility rather than institutional standing. The juxtaposition of these two perspectives - Farzam's quiet respect versus Romano's viral reach -

exemplifies the broader tension between institutional and platform-based modes of journalistic legitimacy.

Another particularly revealing moment arises when both journalists position themselves in relation to public perception and professional boundaries. Farzam responds critically to the comparison often made between him and Romano: "*I've always said: I'm just Farzam. I don't want to be anyone else. Because I believe I have way more credibility than him*" (appx. 1, p. 3). This statement functions as an act of discursive boundary-drawing. Farzam asserts his difference not just in method, but in ethos, emphasising traditional credibility, transparency, and editorial standards. His identity is tethered to institutional trust, not social media performance.

Romano, on the other hand, feels compelled to defend his role as a journalist in the face of assumptions that he is merely a content creator. "*Everything I post is by myself. I want to take care of every single post…because [reporting] the news is not like [being] a content creator*" (appx. 2, p. 9). Here, he draws his own boundary, by pushing back against influencer discourse while insisting on personal responsibility and journalistic rigour. Both quotes reveal that legitimacy is not just enacted through practice, but through positioning. Farzam positions himself outside the influencer economy; Romano positions himself as a legitimate journalist within it. In doing so, each reinforces a different model of what journalism means in the platform age.

This contrast in self-positioning is further reflected in how each journalist articulates ethical responsibility. Farzam states unequivocally: "*I would be fired on the spot if I did what he [Romano] does*" (appx. 1, p. 5). His ethics are anchored in institutional norms, where there are clear boundaries, consequences, and collective standards that govern what can be published. For Romano, ethical responsibility is framed differently. Describing the moment before publishing a sensitive transfer update, he says: "*You want to publish the story, but you have to be careful (…) it's really tense*" (appx. 2, p. 5). Here, restraint is not enforced externally by an editor or newsroom but is internalised as emotional pressure, essentially a personal judgment call made in real time. Both acknowledge the weight of responsibility, but they locate it in fundamentally different structures: Farzam in editorial systems of accountability, Romano in the affective tension of platform immediacy. These distinctions illuminate the deeper paradigmatic divide: the institutional journalist works within a shared ethical framework, while the

platform journalist navigates one shaped by audience expectations, speed, and personal discretion.

Cultural and Structural Contexts

The two journalists are also shaped by different cultural and structural frameworks, which deeply inform their professional practices and discursive strategies. Farzam positions Danish journalism as a field still grounded in ideals of verification, editorial responsibility, and public accountability. When he notes, "*We have a glorified picture of journalism in Denmark, which is in a completely different way if you go to Southern Europe*" (appx. 1, p. 7), he gestures toward a normative standard that values institutional integrity and factual precision. This environment enables and reinforces Farzam's professional identity as a journalist operating within an editorial hierarchy, where legitimacy is accumulated through consistency, peer recognition, and shared norms.

Romano, by contrast, operates within a more fluid Southern European media culture, which, as implied in Farzam's quote above, accommodates more speculation and publicity-oriented logic. Yet Romano practice is no longer confined to the Italian or European media context. His audience is global, and his legitimacy is constructed through the transnational architecture of platforms. His brand, catchphrases, and stylistic delivery transcend national norms and professional conventions, allowing him to position himself not as a product of institutional journalism, but as a digital-native authority. This reflects a broader shift in media systems, where the role of national journalistic cultures is increasingly displaced by algorithmically driven, borderless communication platforms.

These cultural and structural conditions shape how legitimacy is built. Farzam draws on editorial memory, institutional gatekeeping, and a clear division between journalist and audience. Romano's legitimacy is platform-optimised: built through interaction, visibility, and perceived proximity to insider knowledge. The former performs credibility for colleagues, editors, and a local readership; the latter performs it for a dispersed global audience that values speed, recognisability, and exclusivity.

This contrast reflects the very paradigm shift explored throughout this thesis: from a journalistic model rooted in national, institutional infrastructures to one shaped by individual branding, global reach, and digital immediacy. In different ways, Farzam and Romano reveal how journalistic authority is being redefined structurally, culturally, and discursively in the platform age.

Interestingly, this structural divide is further complicated by Farzam's own implicit critique of Romano's role within the digital media ecosystem. At one point, he remarks, "*He's just sitting there, and he gets everything served*" (appx. 1, p. 4), suggesting that Romano merely reprocesses what others have already reported. This accusation echoes Hutchins & Rowe's concept of creative cannibalism by continuous repackaging and circulation of already-available content, as Farzam implicitly says that Romano just re-posts other journalist's stories.

Similarly, Romano's lack of formal journalistic education and his self-made career path place him within what Boyle & Rowe would describe as a citizen sports journalist. While Romano actively positions himself as a journalist, his career trajectory, platform usage, and style of engagement blur the boundaries between professional journalism and influencer-style reporting. Farzam, by contrast, works explicitly to protect those boundaries. Thus, the contrast between them is not just institutional or technological, but ontological: it concerns the very definition of who qualifies as a journalist in the digital age.

Preliminary Conclusion

What emerges from this comparison is not merely a contrast between two professional figures, but a broader insight into the evolving field of sports journalism. Farzam Abolhosseini embodies a residual, institutionally grounded model of journalism that prioritises accuracy, peer legitimacy, and editorial control. Fabrizio Romano exemplifies an emergent model shaped by platforms, focusing on visibility, speed, brand, and affect.

Their discursive practices, how they talk about their work, their values, their challenges, reveal a media field undergoing a profound paradigm shift. This shift is not absolute, and the two models coexist. But the balance is changing. As journalists like Romano gain influence not

through editorial hierarchies but through networked prominence, the very criteria for what counts as "credible journalism" are being rewritten.

In that sense, Farzam and Fabrizio are not merely two professionals in the same field. They are emblematic of two competing futures for journalism — one defined by institutional memory, the other by platform logic. The tension between them is not just personal or professional, but structural and ideological. And it's precisely in that tension that the central research question of this thesis finds its answer.

Discussion

This chapter draws together the insights from the preceding analysis and reflects more broadly on what the empirical findings reveal about contemporary sports journalism. Rather than summarising, the aim is to synthesise and interpret the key patterns, comparing the discursive strategies and legitimacy claims made by Farzam Abolhosseini and Fabrizio Romano, and situating them within the broader paradigm shift from institutional to influencer-driven journalism.

Two Models of Journalistic Legitimacy

Farzam and Romano exemplify two contrasting models of journalistic legitimacy. Farzam's model is rooted in institutional affiliation and peer validation. His credibility stems from editorial oversight, verification procedures, and an ethos of responsibility to the newsroom. By contrast, Romano operates within a platform-native model, where journalistic legitimacy is constructed through visibility, brand recognition, and direct audience engagement.

What Farzam derives from institutional support, Romano compensates for through interpersonal hustle, emotional labour, and symbolic capital. His reporting is framed as a personal responsibility, and is not regulated by an editor, but by his own discipline and values. As shown in his remark that "*everything I post is by myself (...) because a journalist has to report every*

single word in the correct way" (appx. 2, p. 9), Romano enacts legitimacy through authorship, not institutional procedure.

This contrast illustrates a broader reconfiguration of the journalistic field, where legitimacy is no longer defined by a single dominant model but emerges through a mix of competing and overlapping criteria. Farzam and Romano do not simply occupy two opposing poles on a spectrum of old vs. new journalism. Instead, they exemplify how different logics of legitimacy can coexist and be strategically mobilised depending on the platform, audience, and context.

For Farzam, legitimacy is primarily constructed through institutional codes and professional traditions: he defers to editorial systems, peer consultation, and fact-checking processes that anchor his authority within the newsroom and the broader journalistic profession. For Romano, legitimacy is tied more to digital metrics such as follower counts, engagement rates, and the recognisability of his catchphrase "Here We Go." Yet both also rely on a form of relational ethics, as Romano speaks constantly about respect for sources and audience expectations, while Farzam emphasizes trust networks and internal verification.

The key insight is that these logics are not mutually exclusive. In the current media environment, journalists often hybridise them: a digital-native reporter might cite verification as a value to build credibility, just as an institutional journalist might start engaging more directly with their audience on social media. This pluralisation of legitimacy reflects the ongoing transformation of the journalistic field. It's not just a transition from one paradigm to another, but a more complex, adaptive landscape where authority is situational, discursive, and negotiated across multiple arenas at once.

Neither model holds a monopoly on trustworthiness or authenticity; rather, each generates legitimacy in its own terms. The institutional approach remains deeply rooted in editorial oversight, fact-checking conventions, and a public-interest ethos - resources that confer a particular kind of professional gravitas. By contrast, the influencer-centred model draws its credibility from audience-engagement metrics, transparency in sourcing, and the immediacy of direct communication, which can feel more "genuine" to followers who value real-time access. In practice, then, both models prove legitimate here precisely because Farzam and Romano are each exceptionally skilled practitioners who deploy their respective logics with care and consistency. However, in other contexts where, for example, an institutional outlet lacks rigorous

editorial checks or an influencer prioritises clicks over accuracy, it could be argued that one model is substantially more trustworthy than the other. Which model a given audience finds more reliable will often depend on that broader context - whether they prioritise established editorial authority or value the sense of personal connection and speed that influencer reporting offers.

Democratization and Citizen Journalism

The democratization of sports media has opened the field to new actors and voices, but it brings both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, citizen journalism means that information can circulate instantly and that fans or local writers with inside knowledge of a club's situation can bring valuable insights directly to the audience. This creates greater plurality, because not only the major news outlets but also smaller micro-actors can contribute to discussions about transfers, injuries, and contract negotiations. Such an approach often strengthens closeness to readers, since citizen journalists speak the same language as passionate fans and can capture nuances (e.g., local transfer rumours or a player's mood) that larger media may overlook.

On the other hand, this democratization can easily lead to the spread of rumours and inaccuracies. When anyone can call themselves a "journalist" without necessarily having formal editorial procedures or source-verification practices, the risk of misinformation grows. In sports contexts, where timing and exclusive knowledge drive clicks and engagement, citizen journalists may feel pressured to be first rather than be correct. Romano himself admits as much: "*I reported many times incorrect things, it happens, absolutely*" (appx 2, p. 7). As a result, a single false claim, such as "the player has signed", can spread across the network long before anyone verifies it.

The advantages of this democratization lie especially in increased transparency and a wider diversity of perspectives: individual voices that are normally unheard gain the opportunity to contribute, and fans can engage in a dialogue instead of being passive consumers. Citizen journalism also allows facts to be verified collectively: if one person shares evidence of a training appearance, others can quickly call sources or share photos from the stadium to confirm or refute the information.

The disadvantages include the potential undermining of established media's authority and ethical standards. When citizens without editorial responsibility continuously contribute information, it can fragment the audience's perception: what is "true" at one moment may change drastically the next as more voices weigh in. This can undermine the shared understanding that traditional newsrooms seek to maintain through editorial checks and source control. Finally, citizen journalists who are not bound by formal ethical guidelines or requirements for source disclosure risk damaging the reputations of sports clubs and players through rumour-mongering or speculative coverage.

Beyond the Journalist–Influencer Divide

The distinction between journalist and influencer is often treated as binary, yet the analysis reveals this line to be far more blurred. Farzam positions himself in opposition to the influencer model, distancing himself from self-branding and commercial promotion. Romano, meanwhile, explicitly rejects the "content creator" label and insists on his identity as a journalist, despite working in ways often associated with influencers.

Rather than focusing on labels, the more meaningful question is how legitimacy is practiced. Both Romano and Farzam show deep concern for ethical boundaries, verification, and audience trust. The difference lies not in their commitment to truth, but in how they communicate that commitment, and through which infrastructures their credibility is constructed. Farzam anchors his authority in newsroom routines, peer consultation, and institutional transparency. Romano, on the other hand, builds trust through constant presence, speed, and a self-fashioned brand identity grounded in emotional accessibility.

This contrast in practice has sparked criticism, particularly directed at Romano, from figures within traditional media. For instance, the Tipsbladet article "Man skal være kritisk over for Fabrizio Romano" (You must be critical of Fabrizio Romano) from 2024 reflects a broader discomfort among some institutional journalists toward the influencer-style model. In the article, journalist Troels Bager Thøgersen challenges the transparency of Romano's methods and accuses him of acting in the interest of agents rather than the public. The critique stems from a case involving Swedish talent Roony Bardghji, where Romano's team allegedly offered FC

Copenhagen promotional coverage on Romano's platforms in exchange for financial compensation. "*This is not journalism. It's business*," Thøgersen insists, warning that what looks like journalism may actually be driven by commercial logic: "*we need to remember that in this case – what appears to be journalism may in fact be driven purely by commercial interests*" (Hoffskov, 2024).

Yet these critiques also raise an uncomfortable truth: unethical behaviour is not confined to influencers. Just as some influencers may operate with limited regard for journalistic standards, institutional journalists are not immune to sensationalism, clickbait, or agenda-driven coverage. In today's hybrid media landscape, the boundaries between journalism and entertainment, reporting and branding, are increasingly porous. Poor practice can exist across the spectrum, regardless of training or affiliation. What matters, then, is not the label - journalist or influencer - but the underlying values, methods, and transparency behind the work.

By turning the focus from occupational title to discursive practice, this critique also helps reframe the debate. Rather than protecting journalism by drawing hard lines around who counts as a "real" journalist, it may be more productive to assess all media actors - institutional or independent - based on how they construct legitimacy, handle sources, and engage with the public.

Audience, Generations, and Digital Habits

The generational divide is central to understanding this transformation. Hutchins & Rowe describe digital natives as a "generational time bomb" - young audiences raised on digital media, who expect immediacy, interactivity, and personality in their news (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012, p. 6). Romano's success is a testament to this shift. His platform-native fluency and performative style align perfectly with the habits of these new media consumers.

Farzam reflects more traditional consumption habits and serves an audience that still values verification and editorial oversight. He leverages social media primarily to distribute articles, not to build a personal brand. Romano, by contrast, has turned his name and phrase "Here We Go" into a journalistic product in itself. His success suggests that legitimacy for many younger

audiences is less about journalistic credentials and more about speed, reliability, and recognisability.

This shift doesn't imply that older models of journalism are disappearing, but it does show that they are being reshaped by the expectations of new generations. The legitimacy gap is not just a matter of method, but of media culture, and the cultural capital that emerges from different types of engagement.

Journalism's Public Role and the "Dark Side"

Boyle and Rowe highlight the increasingly complex role of sports journalism, pointing to its dual function of both celebrating and scrutinising sport. They observe that journalists now operate "at the intersection of the sport and media fields," navigating "conflicting demands to celebrate and scrutinize sport in highly commercialised and politicised environments" (Boyle & Rowe, 2023, p. 1). This duality poses a fundamental challenge: how can journalists maintain access, popularity, and speed, while simultaneously fulfilling a critical, watchdog role in an industry shaped by powerful commercial interests?

In the two cases examined here, both Romano and Farzam exhibit strong professional ethics, particularly regarding accuracy, timing, and source management. However, neither of them explicitly embraces the broader critical function Boyle and Rowe describe. Romano makes a fleeting reference to "the dark side of football" (appx. 2, p. 10), but the term remains vague. His comments focus on emotional strain, stress, and the pressure of his workload rather than systemic issues such as corruption, inequality, or media manipulation. The "darkness" he identifies is more personal than structural.

However, it's important to consider the context of the interviews. Neither Romano nor Farzam was explicitly asked about broader political or structural issues such as racism, gender inequality, or the commercialisation of sport. Nevertheless, when examining their social media activity, a similar pattern emerges: their content is overwhelmingly focused on transfer news, insider updates, and engagement with followers, rather than critical commentary or structural reflection.

This absence should not be misinterpreted as a lack of professionalism or ethical commitment. On the contrary, both journalists work with a high degree of care, consistency, and dedication. Yet their legitimacy is constructed through different frameworks. Neither positions civic accountability or critical journalism at the centre of their public identity.

Looking Forward

When asked about the likely direction of the field, Farzam responded with a tone of realism, if not resignation: "*You can't stop it. I'm not saying it will become more dominant, but I already think it's gone too far*" (appx. 1, p. 7). His comments refer directly to the rise of influencer-style reporting which, in his view, has already taken hold of how sources and audiences engage with journalism.

What stands out in Farzam's reflection is not just his critique, but his structural awareness. "*I talk to sources* [i.e. players, agents, etc]," he explains, "*and I can hear that it doesn't affect them. They think what he [Romano] does is cool. And not everyone understands what journalism actually is. They confuse influencers and journalists. Unfortunately, that's something we have to live with*" (appx. 1, p. 7). Here, he points to a shift not only in media production, but in audience perception. As younger players, clubs, and followers increasingly prioritise reach, aesthetics, and visibility, the foundational distinctions between journalistic and promotional content begin to erode.

Farzam also highlights geographical distinctions, noting that Denmark still clings to a more verification-oriented model, while in Southern Europe, "*clubs try to get as much exposure as possible*" (appx. 1, p. 7). This comment underscores that the future of sports journalism may not unfold uniformly across borders. Instead, the field could be fragmenting into regionally and culturally specific media logics, shaped by differing expectations, infrastructural pressures, and audience behaviours. The future may not lie in the full replacement of institutional journalism by influencer media, but in the negotiation of coexisting norms - a kind of contested coexistence where both models operate side by side, often in tension, occasionally in dialogue.

From this perspective, the key question is not whether influencer journalism will "win," but how legitimacy will be constructed in a fragmented and hybridised media environment. Looking ahead, it seems likely that journalistic legitimacy will continue to be shaped by platform dynamics, while traditional standards such as verification and independence remain vital reference points, even if they are invoked differently. The task for scholars and practitioners alike is to understand how these forces interact, and to ask not only what journalism is becoming, but what it ought to be in the face of these transformations.

Fabrizio stands as a potential symbol of journalism's future, not because institutional outlets will necessarily disappear, but because more reporters will rely heavily on social platforms. As journalists increasingly cultivate followings online, platform-based reporting like Fabrizio's could become so normalized that it holds hegemonic sway and is perceived as the most credible form of news. A counterweight would be a broader societal pushback - either an outright rejection of social media in favour of strictly traditional outlets or a collective reduction in platform use. Should audiences retreat from feeds and demand more conventional reporting, institutional media could reclaim its authority and reassert its central role in sports journalism.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to explain how two leading transfer reporters stake their claims to journalistic authority in a news ecology increasingly organised by digital platforms, and what that comparison reveals about the wider tug-of-war between newsroom tradition and influencer culture. The evidence shows that while Farzam Abolhosseini and Fabrizio Romano travel very different professional routes, their practices now meet, and sometimes collide, on the same algorithmic terrain.

Farzam's legitimacy is anchored in the routines and collective memory of a legacy newsroom. He presents himself as the custodian of "normal" journalism and will not publish unless every detail can be double-sourced and "stood behind" by his editors. Verification, in other words, is not merely an internal value but a public narrative strategy: stories are written so that readers,

colleagues and rivals can all retrace his steps. The newsroom, with its layers of peer review and its commitment to public-service norms, remains the primary guarantor of truth in his account.

Romano constructs legitimacy almost in mirror image. His authority flows chiefly from visibility capital: tens of millions of followers, the instantly recognisable catchphrase “Here We Go!”, and the ability to stream a transfer update to “more people … than at Camp Nou”. Ethical restraint for him is personalised rather than institutional. He insists on direct authorship and asks followers to accept that transfer news can change as negotiations evolve. Legitimacy is pledged directly to a global audience that rewards speed, access and personality with trust and reach, turning the reporter himself into a live newsroom.

Placed side by side, the two cases reveal that platform dynamics have not replaced traditional newsroom practices; instead, they have diversified the ways in which journalistic legitimacy is constructed. Farzam, despite his roots in legacy media, now uses social platforms to assert authorship and immediacy, while Romano, though deeply embedded in the influencer ecosystem, draws on the language of journalistic integrity to defend his reporting, stressing his access, professionalism, and consistency. Each adopts selected strategies from the other’s domain, resulting in a hybrid media environment where editorial verification and digital visibility no longer exist in opposition, but in mutual reinforcement. Their public skirmishes over who counts as “real” or “influencer” turn out to be forms of symbolic boundary work that keep professional categories fluid.

The research question can therefore be answered in two strokes. First, each reporter builds and justifies legitimacy through the resources most available to his position: institutional oversight, peer-validated accuracy and moral distance in Farzam’s case; audience scale, personal branding and relational ethics in Romano’s. Second, their practices illuminate a field that is no longer ordered solely by institutional authority nor wholly by influencer charisma, but by an unstable mix of both. Verification routines still bestow prestige, yet platform metrics supply an alternative currency of trust; mastering sports journalism today means learning to trade in both.

For journalism, this hybridity suggests that credibility will rest on a portfolio of capitals - editorial, relational and algorithmic - demanding ethical frameworks capable of spanning newsroom and personal brand. For scholarship, it underscores the need to track legitimacy as a moving target: comparative studies across beats, generations and transfer windows will be vital

to see whether this pragmatic coexistence hardens into a new norm or tilts toward a fresh hierarchy altogether. In short, Abolhosseini and Romano do not simply illustrate two competing futures for sports journalism; together they map the contours of a single, hybrid future in which verification and visibility must be braided to sustain authority.

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