

MAINSTREAM MEDIA COVERAGE (UK) OF ESPORTS TOURNAMENT THE ‘EPREMIER LEAGUE’ FINALS 2019 AND 2021.

A MIXED-METHODS STUDY.

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Abstract

This study investigates the factors limiting mainstream media coverage of esports in the UK, specifically focusing on EA Sports' *FIFA Series*. The research aims to assess the current landscape of esports journalism, mainstream media perception, familiarity with the term 'esports', content categorisation, coverage extent, live event viewership, and potential barriers and opportunities for increased exposure. Despite the growing academic interest in esports, there is a noticeable gap in research regarding mainstream media coverage of esports in UK newspaper and broadcast journalism and of esports journalism. This project's critical analysis therefore of esports journalism offers a timely and original contribution to understanding the relationship between mainstream UK media and the niche esports broadcast/journalism sector, and the factors influencing the sector’s limited exposure. Employing a mixed-methods approach, this study combines quantitative and qualitative data collection methods such as surveys, content analysis, and interviews. Focusing on mainstream media coverage of esports, the research utilises Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation Theory (2003) and Tidd and Bessant’s 4Ps of Innovation Model (2021) to explore the potential for esports to become a sustainable sector in the UK's digital economy. The study concentrates on the UK tournament the 'ePremier League' 2019 and 2021 and its reception by UK mainstream media, examining the relationship between traditional and new media platforms. The findings reveal a lack of significant value for esports in UK mainstream media, distrust of mainstream media within the esports sector, and a discrepancy in the categorisation of esports content between mainstream and esports media. This study highlights the need for independent investigative reporting and improved understanding of the esports sector within mainstream media to foster its growth and acceptance. The results hold considerable significance for various stakeholders, including publishers, policymakers, and analysts. For instance, the National Union of Journalists and the British Association of Journalists will find the insights on current journalistic practices valuable. Educational organisations such as the National Training Council of Journalists will appreciate findings regarding the importance of professional training for journalists. Likewise, mainstream broadcasters and esports media, including SKY Sports and Gfinity, will be interested in findings related to live streaming and broadcasting live esports events.

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Chapter 1:

Esports and the UK Mainstream Media: Examining the Disconnect and Opportunities for Future Growth

* 1. **Introduction**

This mixed-methods study is an exploration of the phenomenon of esports in relation to mainstream media coverage in the UK. It was instigated following my personal observations that events such as the ‘Intel Extreme Masters’ 2017 in Katowice, Poland, which drew 173k spectators and 46 million unique online viewers, are not being reflected in British media. The viewing of this particular esports mega event streamed live on Twitch marks the beginning of my interest in this area of research. Through an interrogation of esports and its relationship with newspapers and broadcasters in the UK, it is demonstrated in the findings that there is very little representation of esports by mainstream media, despite significantly large, reported revenues and high levels of audience engagement. Esports generated $1.4bn in 2022 according to the *Global Esports and Live Streaming Market Report 2022* produced byNewzoo,theleading market analysts of the sector (Newzoo, 2022).

What gives the findings of this study particular resonance is that they are set against the backdrop of a declining television audience. While high-profile single sporting events such as the final of ‘Euro 2020’ between England and Italy drew an audience of 22 million across the BBC and ITV the decline in television viewing on average has been accelerating since the beginning of 2022. The Office of Communications (Ofcom) reports in *Media Nations* *2022* the time spent viewing broadcast television is now below 2019 levels, with each progressive month consistently lower than in previous years (Ofcom, 2022). This contrasts sharply with the reported increase of the online audience for esports. The global esports audience has been steadily rising year-on-year, reaching 532 million in 2022 (an 8.7% year-on-year increase). With the main viewing platform for esports in the western hemisphere (Twitch) also reporting a 26% year-on-year increase with 20 billion live gaming hours watched, it is curious that the esports sector has not garnered much attention from mainstream media in the UK (Newzoo, 2022). This research seeks to understand what contributing factors are preventing esports from being covered by broadcasters and newspapers in the UK.

With television viewing figures down year-on-year, traditional revenue streams such as broadcasting rights, sponsorship, branding and advertising are facing organisational challenges. Furthermore, with an increased choice of how viewers engage with content, audiences continue to fragment, continue to become more disparate and less loyal to established media brands. All of which contributes to a volatile media landscape. The growth of the audience within the esports sector illustrates the competition mainstream broadcasters face in the contemporary entertainment space.

The current rise of esports online matched by the decline of viewership on linear television has created an environment where both the esports sector and mainstream media are looking to each other for clues to ensure future sustainability. For esports this is because of its fledgling status. As a relatively new phenomenon of less than 20 years esports is unproven over the long term. For mainstream media future sustainability is in question because of the changing viewing habits of audiences. It is supposed therefore mainstream media and the esports sector could benefit from an exchange of knowledge. New esports broadcasters could gain from looking to the tried and tested practices of legacy media for some answers to questions it is facing. Questions concerning the legitimacy of the sector for example, or about the veracity of officially released viewing data and the quality and credibility of coverage by esports journalists. While traditional broadcasters could learn from new esports media about how to engage and retain live streaming audiences and platforms of distribution such as Twitch.

As there is no mainstream media brand to date covering esports with any significance, esports it is concluded is not considered a mainstream genre of entertainment in the UK. As such, esports presents an opportunity for mainstream media to capture this growing market. However the findings indicate a difficult relationship between mainstream media and esports currently. Esports audiences distrust broadcasters and newspapers to cover esports fairly and accurately. Furthermore, this study has found barriers to mainstream coverage which include: limitations within mainstream newspaper media to accommodate new genres of content because of rigid structures within content management systems and a general opacity levelled at the esports sector by mainstream journalists.

The reality of not having mainstream media coverage is that the sector is being covered by endemic esports publications which this study finds are employing esports journalists who lack training in journalism. This is having an impact on the quality and frequency of independent reporting of the sector. Furthermore there is a strong disconnect between journalists employed by mainstream publishers and journalists employed by endemic esports publications in both contracts of employment and in the types of content produced. Additionally, the distinction between commercial and editorial content in esports journalism is often unclear, which further complicates the task of producing independent reporting.

To date there has been no academic study considering the role of mainstream media in the emerging esports sector in the UK, nor any that addresses how esports is being covered by publications endemic to the sector. This is therefore timely and significant original research exploring how mainstream journalists and broadcast media are responding to this new genre of entertainment and esports as a new genre of journalism. Drawing upon a theoretical framework of innovation research this study hypothesises that engagement of mainstream media will be an unavoidable pathway to ensuring a sustainable future for esports.

* 1. **The aims of this study**

In this study the research question seeks to explore the contributing factors preventing mainstream media coverage of esports in the UK. The aims of this research are multifaceted: (1) to gage the current landscape of esports journalism in the UK; (2) to gage perceptions of mainstream media engagement with esports; (3) to establish knowledge of the term esports within mainstream media; (4) to establish how esports content is categorised by mainstream media; (5) to quantify how much esports content is being covered by mainstream media; (6) to quantify the size of viewership of a live esports event; (7) to analyse the broadcast of a live esports event. By addressing these aims, this research provides insights into the current state of esports journalism in the UK and identifies the factors that may be limiting broader coverage in the mainstream media landscape.

This study has taken sports, in particular football, as the area within mainstream media to explore esports coverage. The esports title chosen to specifically focus on is the EA Sports game *FIFA Series* and the tournament; the ‘ePremier League’*.* The justification for this choice being that if mainstream media was to cover any esports, a game of digital football would be one of the most accessible as football is a game already understood by the general public and no explanation of the rules by journalists is necessary. Furthermore, sports media offers a natural point of comparison because of the alignment with sport through the accepted term ‘esports’ to describe the sector and because of the many moves worldwide for esports to become a legitimate sport in its own right at global events such as the ‘Olympics’ (IOC, 2023). A final point for selecting a sports-related esports title is that much of the discourse concerning esports in academia has centred around whether esports is a sport or not.

Given the newness of the field, the body of research to draw on is unsurprisingly limited, although there is a growing number of academics from a range of disciplines turning their attention to esports as a phenomenon. What is noticeable in current research in esports however, is the lack of referencing to journalism and coverage of content by mainstream media, both by newspapers and by broadcasters in the UK. The focus on media coverage is not to be found in the field of Journalism Studies nor Game Studies. Existing research has focused around areas of esports media production such as the use of the platform Twitch as a method of distribution (Bingham, 2017); impacts of technologies on sport (Miah, 2017); comparisons of esports and traditional sports fandom (Brown, 2017) and esports venues (Jenny et al., 2018) but there is to date, no analysis investigating broadcast media or journalism in the UK covering esports. This project has exposed the gaps in literature concerning the relationship between mainstream media in the UK and the niche esports broadcast/journalism sector, what this new area of journalism and broadcast media is composed of, and how this niche area is being treated by mainstream journalists.

* 1. **Methodology**

The methodology for this study utilises a combination of inductive and deductive inquiry, providing both quantitative and qualitative data, namely: surveys, content analysis and interviews. As a mixed-methods research study, the qualitative and quantitative data was analysed separately and then integrated to allow for meta inferences to be drawn and considered against the existing cannon of academic research, industry reports, and grey literature. The rationale for adopting a mixed-methods design is discussed in Chapter 4, including reflection on how the subject of inquiry together with my background as a journalist, informed this approach.

Given that esports is a relatively new phenomenon in the entertainment space current theories of innovation proved useful frameworks to explore the data. In particular Rogers’ (2003) Diffusion of Innovation Theory as it identifies two major factors essential for an innovation to be accepted by a general populous: credible statistics and positive stories. Both of these elements were highlighted early on in the exploratory phase of the research by industry experts as barriers to esports becoming accepted as a mainstream activity in the UK, and ergo a sustainable sector of the digital economy. In light of Rogers’ theory, the consideration of whether or not esports can become sustainable without positive mainstream media coverage makes the exploration of the current landscape of esports journalism in this study all the more pertinent for the esports sector.

A second theory of innovation provided a framework for interrogating the findings. Tidd and Bessant 4Ps of Innovation Model (2021) describes four directions a company can take when exploring avenues of innovation. The four directions for innovation identified are: product, process, position and paradigmatic innovation. In other words, there are opportunities for a company to innovate in terms of product design and development, in terms of how a company operates, in terms of how a company is positioned in relation to competitors, and for a fundamental change in a belief system. By modifying the model and placing esports at the centre rather than a company, the sector can be explored as an agent of change for mainstream media, journalists and game publishers to examine potential areas of innovation in response to esports. Tidd and Bessant’s model conceived as a framework for formalising a strategy for innovation, forms the basis of organising and examining the data from this study in Chapter 6.

To set limitations and make the study manageable it is confined to one esports title; *FIFA Series*, published by EA Sports and one specific *FIFA* tournament; the ‘ePremier League’, with a focus on the broadcast of the live Finals in two seasons, 2019 and 2021. One of the reasons for selecting this particular tournament is that it is a UK-only competition in contrast to the many *FIFA* tournaments that are open to the global esports market. As this study is concerned with the British mainstream media, it was fitting to select a UK tournament. A further reason for selection was that the ‘ePremier League’ was a new tournament, with the inaugural year coinciding with the start of this study, 2018/2019. The ‘ePremier League’ therefore provided a unique opportunity to assess the success or failure of an esports tournament from inception.

Concentrating on just one esports title and one tournament allowed for a deep dive into mainstream media’s coverage and clear conclusions drawn which could have been confused had other esports titles been included. Keeping the research study to a singular game and a singular tournament allowed the focus to be on the mainstream media coverage rather than on the differences between types of esports titles for example. At the time of the research there were only two viable seasons for the ‘ePremier League’: Season 1 and Season 3. Season 2 was not selected because of the disruption caused by the global pandemic. A more detailed rationale for the selection of this title and tournament is discussed in Chapter 4.

The *FIFA* ‘ePremier League’ is a three-month long tournament culminating in a live Final broadcast on the streaming platform Twitch. What makes this tournament of particular interest is the unique collaboration between game publishers, sports organisations and mainstream media. The tournament is the creation of the UK’s ‘Premier League’ (a sports organisation); the game used for the tournament, EA Sports *FIFA* (a game publisher); and the main media partner, SKY Sports (a mainstream media publisher). This therefore presents an interesting opportunity to explore the confluence of real-world and digital sport while investigating the relationship between legacy media, SKY Sports, and new media platforms, in this case Twitch. And because the game is football this allows for mainstream journalistic output and working practices to be considered against those of esports journalists. The hypothesis being that as football is a game understood by both football fans and esports football fans it's a game that can be more easily covered by mainstream media and that if esports football games aren’t being covered then there is very little hope of more complex esports titles such as *League of Legends* to permeate mainstream media.

A detailed content analysis of both streams of the live Finals in Season 1 and Season 3 was conducted, with attention paid to viewer numbers, broadcast features and general observations on the viewing experience of both the game play and the wrap-around studio segments that made up the programmes. The overall purpose was to get a comprehensive understanding of what was being covered and to experience the event first-hand as a viewer to compare what was reported with empirical data. This approach was found to be of importance as it highlighted discrepancies between the viewer data as recorded by me and officially published data, leading to questions concerning the credibility of stats used by industry to report esports events. Monitoring both the YouTube and Twitch stream revealed interesting insight into the functionality of these two platforms and underlined a distinct difference in audiences. The content analysis also included the monitoring of mainstream media engagement with the Finals. The numbers of articles covering the event by newspapers and broadcasters was, for example, recorded. Analysis of the mainstream media coverage of the live Finals in Seasons 1 and 3 specifically was also measured against general mainstream media coverage of esports and the esports title *FIFA*. This enabled conclusions to be drawn on the success or failure of the ‘ePremier League’ in particular.

The current landscape of esports journalism in the UK and perceptions of mainstream media engagement with esports was explored through interviews with industry experts, with esports journalists employed by endemic esports publications and two rounds of surveys of mainstream media journalists. The industry expert interviews conducted in the exploratory phase helped shape the key areas of focus for the study and provided a framework for the more targeted interviews with the esports journalists which followed. Both sets of interviews provided rich qualitative data ranging from the relationship of esports with UK mainstream media, to current working practices of journalists.

* 1. **Reader Orientation: The organisation of the thesis**

To assist the reader, the thesis begins with a chapter exploring key terms used in the study. This was a necessary place to start as esports as a field of study doesn’t exist as a discrete body of scholarly work. Instead the subject is to be found within a number of different disciplines. For this reason it is necessary to clarify what this study means by the term esports. The chapter therefore opens with an evaluation of existing definitions of the term, starting with a very early definition (Wagner, 2006) which admittedly predates what contemporary esports has developed into today, but proves useful in illustrating some of the aspects of the sector that make the term difficult to define. A central area of difficulty lies in the implication over whether esports can be defined as a sport. A relevant discourse as it underlines a disparity between how academia sees the sector and as the findings will demonstrate how industry sees itself; not as a sport.

The challenges in finding an acceptable universal definition for the term are considered against the suggestion of whether a reclassification of the games which determines them as esports, would assist in providing clarity for the sector. The four genres of games that are used currently to describe esports focus on the modes of play; first person shooter compared to multiplayer online battle arena games for example, rather than three suggested thematic areas; sports, fantasy and hybrid. I argue in this opening chapter that splitting esports into these distinct areas would help with defining the term for both academia and industry. This discussion is relevant because the findings demonstrate a lack of clarity over what esports is or isn’t, is one of the barriers preventing the sector being covered by mainstream media.

Not finding a satisfactory definition of the term from the literature to suit this study necessitated a new definition to be formed. This study therefore defines esports as: *the practice of professionalised video gaming through licensed tournaments.* Chapter 2 sets out the reasoning for this definition but hereI would like to draw the reader’s attention to my choice of spelling of the term as the spelling is a contentious issue within industry. As far as the esports sector in the UK is concerned the spelling is ‘esports’. All lower case. A capital letter is only used if the word appears at the beginning of a sentence. This is not the case however for other sectors. Academia and mainstream media both adopt a variety of spellings, including; E sports, E-sports, and eSports. Although there was some conclusion drawn to the arguments in 2017 with the confirmation of all lower case, no hyphen, spelling of the word by the Associated Press (AP)[[1]](#footnote-2) in its styleguide, the word is still consistently spelled by academics and publishers in ways which are not recognised by industry. This is an area of contention because the way in which the word is spelled, according to findings from this research, is a key indicator of credibility. The industry standard spelling ‘esports’ is therefore used for the definition and throughout this study.

Further terms requiring clarity are spectator, viewer and audience member. As esports is both a virtual and a physical experience in that people watch live events online but also attend tournaments in-person the terms are used interchangeably in both academic literature and industry reports which can be confusing for the reader. For the purposes of clarity the terms as used in this study are defined. Equally the terms mainstream media, legacy media, platforms and publishers are defined, again with the purpose of providing clarity over what is referenced when these terms are employed.

Following the definitions, Chapter 3 reviews current scholarly and industry knowledge on esports. The chapter is organised into six sections: (1) esports and journalism (2) broadcasting: context for esports (3) co-creation and co-mediation (4) online versus in-person spectatorship (5) the theoretical framework for the study (6) defining the research question. The chapter begins with situating esports within academia and its position as a discrete field. This is followed by an examination of esports and journalism. As this study is concerned with contemporary mainstream media coverage of the sector, it is helpful to have some understanding of how the ecosystem of esports journalism has evolved. A trajectory of the development is therefore considered. Showing how esports journalism has evolved in this way provides context and an explanation for the landscape of contemporary esports journalism in the UK revealed by the findings.

Having situated esports within industry in terms of journalism, the chapter then considers esports journalism within academic literature. What is revealed is a scarcity of research focusing on journalism within esports and a noticeable lack of reference to the term journalist in esports research. Furthermore esports as a genre of journalism is not considered as legitimate within Journalism Studies as is highlighted by the omission of this sector in literature. One example of note is *The Language of Journalism (2020)*, which promises a comprehensive assessment of contemporary journalism. Although this book explores journalistic tools such as social media and live streaming, Twitch - the home of esports, is curiously absent from a chapter on live online broadcast, as is any reference to esports or gaming.

As Twitch is central to esports this chapter on current scholarly and industry knowledge examines the impact this platform, and live streaming has had on journalism, in particular game reviews. The changes to a format so distinctive of video game journalism have evolved from the direct interaction with the audience that platforms such as Twitch afford and the ability to play a game while reviewing it, enabling a revenue stream for journalists from game publishers. Being paid to review however blurs the line between editorial and commercial. The findings show that this combining of public relations with news reporting is a distinguishing feature of those employed as esports journalists. This chapter considers then what the term journalist means for esports and the impact of not having a clear separation between reporting the news and sponsored editorial. The section on esports and journalism concludes with an examination of literature concerning sports journalism, suggesting that the lack of research on esports journalism is unsurprising given a relatively low status of sports journalism with Journalism Studies.

Following this, section two: broadcasting; context for esports, provides both a short history of broadcasting with a particular focus on football and an overview of esports broadcasting. The purpose of this section is to provide context for esports broadcasts and the live streamed Finals of the ‘ePremier League’. Themes explored in this section include the impact developments in technology have had and are having on audience behaviour and the general downward trajectory of television viewers with particular reference to sports media. This is against rising viewers on streaming platforms such as Twitch and YouTube. A key consideration is the challenge of measuring audiences dispersed across different platforms of distribution and the evaluation of what is ‘popular’ using data sets which are not like for like. Differences between linear and non-linear viewing are explored as is the function of scheduling. Key terms used to describe contemporary broadcasting such as direct-to-consumer, over-the-top-television are explored, as is the arrival of Amazon into the broadcast market. Esports broadcast media is positioned as the embodiment of new sports media. Key considerations for esports; the online community and the in-person spectators are explored in sections four and five. Central to these two sections is the discourse around esports as sports and the similarities and differences between the esports community and sports fans.

The penultimate section in Chapter 3 is concerned with the theoretical framework against which the study is considered. Esports is a relatively new phenomenon and as such can be described as an innovation. While viewing figures for live streamed esports events are reportedly outstripping live sporting events on television, the sector remains unproven in the long-term raising questions over the sustainability of the sector. Drawing on extensive case studies Diffusion of Innovation Theory (Rogers, 2003) determines that an innovation goes through a number of stages before it becomes accepted by the general populous. Esports is considered against these stages which include two key issues for the sector; credible statistics and positive stories. This section also provides a brief outline of a second theory of innovation used to interrogate the findings: Tidd and Bessant’s 4ps of Innovation Model (2021). This model and how it is applied to this research forms the framework for Chapter 6.

Chapter 3 concludes with defining the research question, the rationale for which is based on gaps in the literature, industry reports and exploratory interviews with esports industry experts. This chapter leads into how the research question is addressed using the chosen methodology.

Chapter 4 begins with the reasons for selecting the type of esports for the study: simulated sports, the esports title: *FIFA Series* and the esports tournament: the ‘ePremier League’. It also justifies why football over another simulated sport was selected as the focus for answering the research question. It describes the process of data capture for the study and how the research question is addressed. There is a consideration of what mixed-methods research is and as a field of methodology why this approach was most appropriate for this study. A timeline of the research is provided. The chapter then sets out how interviews with esports industry experts helped narrow the focus for the study, informing the aims of the research in order to answer the research question. The steps taken to achieve these aims are made explicit.

The research procedures used in this study are interviews, surveys and content analysis. The methods chapter addresses each instrument starting with a detailed breakdown of the process for the semi-structured interviews with the esports journalists. There is a discussion of selecting the sample, how the interviews were structured, my observations about the process and coding of the data. The surveys are addressed next, with a focus on the sample selection and the design of the questions. Finally the content analysis is described. This is a complex section including mainstream media coverage, viewership of the live Finals of the ‘ePremier League’ and an analysis of the broadcast. Throughout the chapter there is reflection on my own position in the study, how my background as a newspaper journalist has informed the research design and a consideration of the differences between research as a journalist and research as an academic. The chapter concludes with an identification of the limitations of the methodology.

The findings are described in Chapter 5. In line with mixed-methods research the quantitative and qualitative data from the three instruments; surveys, interviews and content analysis, was collected and analysed separately and then integrated to draw further inferences, or meta-inferences. The chapter is therefore organised into four thematic sections based on the meta-inferences drawn from integrating the data sets. The first section of data presented relates to mainstream media and esports coverage (1). The second section of data relates to esports journalism (2). The third section of data relates to esports titles and tournaments (3). The fourth and final section is data related to platforms of distribution: Twitch and YouTube (4). Key findings are clearly listed at the beginning of each section.

Chapter 6 interrogates the findings as set out in Chapter 5 and explores the value of the findings for industry and for academia. To help with this process Tidd and Bessant’s Innovation of Space Model: 4Ps (2021) is used as a framework. Conceived as a way of formalising how a company can innovate, the model is used in this study to examine how esports as an agent of change can be used by stakeholders to innovate through the 4Ps identified by Tidd and Bessant. The chapter is therefore organised around the 4Ps; position, process, product and paradigm innovation.

Position is the first ‘P’ to be examined. Referencing the data, mainstream media’s position in relation to esports is considered with a particular focus on the BBC and what can be gained by repositioning the brand to regain trust from the esports sector. The lack of content by the BBC for the esports community is discussed as is the role of public service broadcasters and their relevancy for future audiences. This section also examines why the esports sector needs to look at ways of repositioning so that is more open to coverage by mainstream media, including how esports titles and tournaments are presented, and how the sector categorises itself. This section on position innovation ends by considering the contribution positive stories of the sector can have for future sustainability drawing upon Rogers’ Diffusion of Innovation theory (2003).

Process is the second ‘P’ to be examined. This section uses the data to look at two impactful areas, the process of newsgathering and the working practices of journalists. What is evident from the findings is that esports journalists are operating in different spaces to mainstream journalists and there are significant differences around pay, training and job specifications. One of the areas explored in this section is the role unions play in the profession of journalism and the significance of having a press card. What is discussed is the narrow definitions used by the unions to determine who qualifies for a press card, consequentially discounting many people working in sectors such as esports. What this means for those who fall outside of the definition is examined. Another area considered is the impact formal and on-the-job training in journalism plays in safeguarding both the individual and the profession and the consequences of not having any training. Newsgathering and the working practices of mainstream journalists are considered against the working practices of esports journalists, with a particular focus on the platform Reddit and an examination of the differences in newsgathering.

Product is the third ‘P’ to be examined. This section looks at the findings that point to issues with how esports titles are designed and esports tournaments packaged as barriers to mainstream media coverage. The discussion addresses criticisms concerning the playability of the game *FIFA* Series, in particular the mode of play selected for the ‘ePremier League’; Ultimate Mode, the impact Artificial Intelligence has on the element of randomness and the effect of releasing a new version of the game each season. The data analysis of the ‘ePremier League’ demonstrates how these issues with the design of the game and the settings selected contributed to a lack of engagement with mainstream media in the UK. By way of comparison the discourse turns to a similar sports-simulated esports tournament based in North America; the ‘NBA2K League’. This basketball league run by the National Basketball Association has similarities and significant differences with the ‘ePremier League’ and serves to highlight how decisions made in the organising of tournaments can have on the success or failure of an esports competition. Finally, drawing on the viewer data and the analysis of the broadcasts of the live Finals, the differentiated approach needed for esports broadcasts compared with sports is discussed.

Paradigm is the fourth ‘P’ to be examined. In this final section of chapter 6 esports as a challenger to mainstream media normative constructs in content production, consumption and distribution are discussed. Paradigm shifts experienced by broadcast media currently are illustrated through esports as an example of a new genre of content without confines of tradition or legacy. Mainstream media’s rigidity with content management, the disparity of the audience using a variety of access points for the same content, the expansion of technology corporations such as Amazon into the space of content producers and internet service providers, are all discussed as points of tension for mainstream media.

In the concluding chapter, there is reflection over this research study and a summing up of the salient points uncovered through the systematic analysis of the ‘ePremier League’ and mainstream media’s coverage of this tournament in the UK. The chapter addresses the impact the data has for industry, both esports and mainstream media, and the impact the data has for academia. Considerations for the esports sector are articulated including new policies for governing bodies, a centralised global metric system for testing the veracity of the data which supports the industry, an acknowledgement of the role mainstream media can play in securing future sustainability and a willingness to adapt games and tournaments to suit newspaper and television coverage. For mainstream media considerations concerning the importance of inhabiting platforms such as Reddit and publishing content where the audience is located, in effect reversing the strategy of using external platforms to drive traffic back to branded websites. The future of esports, and mainstream media’s ability to respond to new genres of content is considered against the development of contemporary game titles such as HADO which sees the integration of augmented reality technology with sports, denoting a move away from keyboards and consoles into physical competition. Considerations for academia point to questions raised by this study requiring further scrutiny from scholars. This includes fundamental questions over the role of journalism and journalists in contemporary society, ownership of data, regulation of platforms and channels of distribution and the legitimacy of public service broadcasters such as the BBC. Recommendations for future investigation are articulated.

**Chapter 2**

Defining the Game: Unravelling Key Terminology and Debates in the Interdisciplinary World of Esports

This chapter embarks on a critical exploration of key terms and concepts essential to the understanding of esports as an emerging field of study. Recognising that esports is not yet a discrete body of scholarly work and is instead dispersed across various disciplines, it becomes crucial to establish clear definitions and frameworks for this study. By examining existing definitions of the term ‘esports’ and addressing the contentious debate over whether it should be classified as a sport, this chapter aims to provide a comprehensive foundation for further investigation. It also discusses the potential benefits of reclassifying game genres within esports and the impact of various spellings and terminology on industry credibility. Ultimately, the aim is to clarify essential terms and concepts, such as spectator, viewer, audience member, mainstream media, legacy media, platforms, and publishers, to ensure a cohesive and informed understanding throughout this study.

**2:1 A redefinition of the term ‘esports’**

Although the term is a relatively new one, the idea of esports, that is computer-based competitive gaming, can be traced back to a single tournament in 1972. The ‘Intergalactic Spacewar Olympics’ was held at Stanford Artificial Intelligence Lab in California, a venue more used to developing emerging technologies for ARPA – the Advanced Research Projects Agency (now known as DARPA, US Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency). Since the time of the first local area network (LAN) competitions which drew groups to play video games against each other in the late seventies, the rise of esports as a pastime, and now as a profession, has risen exponentially. This has been partly propelled by faster internet speed which have allowed players to compete online, on mobiles and have games streamed in front of live audiences across the world. The rise has also been propelled by the introduction of high value prizes offered by game publishers. The introduction of monetary reward gave esports players the potential to earn a living from esports, opening the way for the professionalisation of the sector. Esports as a term was not used to describe the sector, however, until 2000. The use of the term is credited to Jie-won, who was the South Korean Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism Park at the time. Jie-won used the term at the founding ceremony of the Korean esports Association. Since then, the term has been widely used to describe the sector (Dal Yong Jin, 2011, p. 67).

The most oft cited scholars attempting definitions within academia are Wagner (2006), Witkowski (2012), Dal Yong Jin (2011), Hamari and Sjöblom (2017). All four scholars have a variation of focus, highlighting some areas at the exclusion of others. Wagner defines esports as “an area of sport activities in which people develop and train mental or physical abilities in the use of information and communication technologies” (Wagner, 2006, p. 441). While Wagner places esports within sports his focus is on the technology with no consideration of the element of competition. Esports is not simply a term used to describe a series of functions employing information and communication technologies. Instead, it is a term that refers to a competitive environment in which professional gamers are able to exercise superior skills that importantly afford the ability to generate an income.

Witkowski’s definition includes the element of competition but lacks the idea of it being a professional occupation. She defines esports as “an organised and competitive approach to playing video games” (Witkowski, 2012, p. 350). Witkowski’s definition includes the factor of competition but the focus on esports as “playing video games” doesn’t convey work, it suggests something more indicative of leisure, more aligned to the origins of the meaning of the word sport, ‘to divert, amuse, please, play; to seek amusement.’ An observation worth noting is that the word esport (albeit coincidentally) can be found in the etymology of the word ‘sport’. It derives from the Old French term ‘desporter’, ‘deporter’, which can be translated as, to ‘carry away’ (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.).

For Hamari and Sjöblom, esports is defined as a form of sport with the emphasis on the mediation by computers. Esports is where “the primary aspects of the sport are facilitated by electronic systems; the input of players and teams as well as the output of the esports system are mediated by human-computer interfaces. In more practical terms, esports refer to competitive video gaming (broadcasted on the internet)” (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017, p. 211).  
For Dal Yong Jin “esports is a gaming, computing, media, and sports event all at once” (Dal Yong Jin, 2011, p. 63), “an exemplary case of digital convergence” (Dal Yong Jin, 2011, p. 61). What the difference in definitions serve to illustrate is that there is not a universally accepted focus for the definition of the term esports, a challenge that has presented problems not only within academia but also in industry, as the data will demonstrate, with the lack of consistency over where esports content sits within mainstream media.

Despite the variety of descriptions for the term, esports is consistently considered by academics (and mainstream media) as aligning with sports. This is interesting because it highlights a disparity between how academia perceives the sector and how the esports sector defines itself. Sports is not how esports journalists define the sector, nor how endemic esports organisations describe the industry either. By way of illustration, in an article defining esports aimed at ‘non-fans’, the British Esports Association, a national body established in 2016 to promote esports in the UK, described esports as “a term used to describe competitive video gaming” (British Esports Association, 2016). The word sport is not used once in the industry article, instead, it references professional gaming.

While the comparisons between esports and sports appear to be obvious, they are significantly different as this study evidences. For Wagner (2006, p. 441) the question over whether esports is a sport, is “to some extent irrelevant for the academic discussion of esports”. The question however has dominated scholarly discourse over the past few years. Holden et al., (2016) suggest that, particularly for markets in the US, whether or not esports is classed as a sport, matters because the classification has an impact on how the sector is then regulated, and that esoteric debates about whether or not esports is a sport fail to tackle the real focus which is that “the classification of the activity may well be determinative of the liability facing esports operators in the US” (Holden et al. 2016, p. 251). Whether or not esports is a sport suggests further classification is needed therefore, not least as this affects a variety of legal frameworks. One such framework is the *Sports Bribery Act* of 1996 which legislates against bookmaking and match-fixing in the US. If, on the other hand, esports is deemed not to be a sport, but entertainment, the sector could be regulated by legislation such as the *Quiz Show Scandal Statute* of 1960; an amendment to the *US* *Federal Communications Act*, aiming in part to safeguard against rigging of quiz shows for entertainment purposes and put in place to protect against manipulation and fraud. Such legislation could hold particular resonance for esports broadcasting. For Holden et al, therefore, whether or not esports is sport or not, matters.

The term esports straddles both the physical world and the digital environment having both online participants and also in-person spectators. The term also refers to the production of broadcasts and the design of tournaments. It involves both the distribution and consumption of content. Esports utilises multiple platforms, operates across different consoles, and crosses a plethora of markets. The literature supports my findings as a researcher that the aspect making esports particularly difficult to define, is the diversity of games that the term needs to represent and the way in which these games are currently categorised. This, therefore, justifies the topic as both a complex and urgent form of media that is important and timely to study.

Esports fall into a four broad categories: MOBA – these are multiplayer online battle arena games such as *League of Legends*, *Dota 2*; MMORPG – these are massively multiplayer online role-playing games, such as *World of Warcraft*, *Everquest*; FPS - these are first person shooters such as *Call of Duty*, *Counter-Strike*, *Overwatch*. This category also includes any games played from a first-person perspective – the player experiencing the play through the eyes of the protagonist. The final category is SIM games – games that ‘simulate’ real life in some way. These come in many genres for example SIM racing games such as *Dirt Rally 2.0*, *iRacing*, and *Gran Turismo 7*, and team-sports-simulation games such as football’s *FIFA Series* and basketball’s *NBA2K*. While the most popular online games of 2022 were MOBA and FPS games - *League of Legends* (7,130 professional players with a game pool prize fund of $7.7m), *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (more than 10,000 professional players with a game pool prize fund of $16.11m) and *Dota 2* (prize fund $32.85m) (Petermeier, 2022; Gough, 2023) it is SIM games – the games that cross over from ‘physical’ to ‘digital’ sport – that this research is particularly focusing on. It is this area which is seeing an explosion in terms of new tournaments, new leagues and importantly an interest from professional sports clubs and sponsors. 2018 saw the ‘*FIFA* World Cup’ played out in Russia followed by the ‘eSport *FIFA* World Cup’ played out at the O2 in London; the launch of the inaugural ‘NBA2K league’ with drafts of esports players following the draft of professional basketball players in the ‘NBA League’ draft; Roland Garros, organisers of the ‘French Open’ launching their gaming tournament the ‘Roland-Garros e-series by BNP Paribas’; and Formula 1 and its inaugural ‘Esports Series World Championship’.

Defining esports by these four categories: MOBA, MMORPG, FPS and SIM games, adds a layer of complexity contributory to making the sector difficult to define. This is because this way of categorising esports does not distinguish between those titles which are fantasy strategy games and those that have their roots within sports, which has fuelled the debate about whether esports is sports or not, referred to earlier. Current debates about esports becoming an Olympic medal event illustrate the division between genres. The *Olympic agenda 2020+5* sets out very clear ambitions “to encourage sports participation and promote the Olympic values with a special focus on youth” (IOC, 2021) through video gaming and esports. The ‘Olympic Virtual Series’ at the top end of the 2020 Olympics (held in Tokyo 2021 due to the pandemic) saw 250k people compete in simulated games in cycling, rowing, sailing, motor sports, baseball, and reportedly drawing an audience of 750k but notably did not include any one of the top-tier esports titles such as *League of Legends*. As far as the IOC is concerned, esports is only simulated sports. All nine games to be included in the first ‘Olympic Esports Week’ to be held in Singapore in June 2023 are sports related lending further evidence to this conclusion (IOC, 2023).

Alternatively splitting esports into three distinct areas: sports, fantasy and hybrids, would help with clarity. At one end of the scale, the simulated sports games (SIMS), at the other end the strategy games which are set in alternate realities (MOBA, MMORPG, FPS), and in the middle, the hybrids: games which essentially take the rules of ‘real’ sport but situate the games in alternate realities. An example of which is *Rocket League*. *Rocket League* is a game of football which utilises cars instead of footballers to drive a ball, and instead of simply a football pitch, the playing field extends to the sides, where the cars can race up and over a caged playing area. Ultimately though, the rules are the same as football. The game requires two teams, to play in positions of attack and defence, and to score by getting the ball into your opponents’ goal.

To clarify then, there are the titles which fit the definition of esports as: “alternative sport realities, that is, to electronically extended athletes in digitally represented sporting worlds” (Hemphill, 2005, p. 199), there are those games that don’t fit this definition, and those games that straddle both. And so, for the purposes of this study, esports is defined as *the practice of professionalised video gaming through licensed tournaments* and the genre of games of particular focus is *simulated sports games* (SIMS) that fit Hemphill’s definition and show a convergence of the real to the digital.

* 1. **Spectators, viewers, audience**

Spectators, viewers and audience are terms which also need defining because esports is both a ‘virtual’ experience, in that people watch an event streamed online and also a ‘physical’ experience, in that people come to arenas to watch the competitions in person as part of a live audience. In the area of sport someone who attends a sporting event in person is defined as a spectator and someone who watches a sporting event on television is defined as a viewer. While this area of difference has been explored within the field of Sport Studies(Buraimo and Simmons, 2009) in esports the two terms are used interchangeably. Baker et al (2017) provide a good illustration for how these two terms have been treated in research around esports to date. In their comparison of esport vs sport spectator motives they do not make a distinction between in-person spectating and viewing online and consequently the term spectator as used by them covers both groups. Not making the distinction explicit confuses the discourse, which is further compounded by the use of the term audience.

Audience and ‘audience member’ commonly used by scholars studying participatory media (Jackson, 2009) means different things depending on the context of use. As media scholar Andy Ruddock notes the complexity with understanding audiences lies in the difficulty in defining the term (Ruddock, 2005). For Ruddock an audience denotes active participation and shared experience of a media text or a live event. For other scholars audience denotes a group of cultural participants engaging with media content in a variety of ways (Livingston, 2005) consuming and responding to content shaped by technology and platforms (Napoli, 2011). Sue Turnbull adds a consideration of behaviour when defining the term; “while audiences may indeed assemble for a specific media event … (*they*) may also be nomadic, distracted and fragmented some, if not all, of the time” (Turnbull, 2020, p. 110). Audience as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) however references something far less participatory “the people gathered to see or listen to a play, concert, film” (Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 40).

It is necessary therefore to make explicit which groups are being referred to in this study. Spectator is defined as someone who physically attends an event, taking the Latin word for a public show, ‘spectaculum’, as the root and as defined by the OED “a person who watches at a show, game, or other event” (Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 700). Viewer is defined as someone who watches through a medium. By the OED’s definition this is “a person who views something, especially television” (Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 823). In this study, a viewer pertains to someone accessing content through any device which allows a person to watch. Some of these devices include computers, mobile phones, televisions. Audience is defined as both spectators and viewers but where necessary referred to as distinct from each other (*Fig 2.1*). The significance of distinction between spectator and online engagement for esports is a discussion examined in Chapter 3.

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| Diagram  Description automatically generated  *Source: Filotrani, 2021*  Online  In-person |

*Fig.2.1: Defining the audience*

This study defines spectator as someone who physically attends an event, viewer as someone who watches through a device and audience encapsulates both spectators and viewers.

* 1. **Media: mainstream, legacy, platforms and publishers**

As the term media can cover a wide array of channels and modes of distribution, and can be interchangeable in many circumstances, it is necessary to include my definitions of aspects of the media referred to in this study. When referencing data concerning content produced by mainstream newspapers, this is any content published online on a newspaper website, in any medium, including written, video and audio. It does not refer to print. The newspapers defined as mainstream, and their corresponding websites, for the purposes of this study are: m*etro.co.uk*, the *Dailymail.co.uk*, the *Standard.co.uk*, the *Mirror.co.uk*, *thetimes.co.uk*, *thesun.co.uk*, the *Telegraph.co.uk*, the *Express.co.uk*, the *Dailystar.co.uk*, *Inews.co.uk*, the *FT.com*, *theguardian.com.*

When referencing data concerning content produced by mainstream broadcasters, this is any content published online on a broadcaster website, in any medium, including written, video and audio. The broadcasters defined as mainstream for the purposes of this study, and their corresponding websites, are: ITV.com, BBC.co.uk, Channel4.com, Channel5.com, SKY.com/SKY Sports.com and BT.com.

When referencing endemic esports publishers these are the publishers identified as producing the main publications of esports content online for the UK audience. These publications are: *The esports Observer*[[2]](#footnote-3)*, Esports Insider, Esports News UK, Dot Esports, Dexerto.*

Esports broadcasters refers to a company responsible for producing a live streaming programme covering an esports tournament. The esports broadcaster for this study specifically refers to Gfinity Studios. The company also has an in-house editorial team which produces news and features for its website gfinityesports.com

When the term ‘legacy media’ is used in this study, it is used to distinguish a publisher holding broadcasting licences and producing content prior to the advent of online streaming platforms and the developments of video on demand (VOD) and over the top television (OTT). “Legacy media: refers to forms of media that predate the internet and that may, or may not, still privilege their media presentations in non-online forms” (Perreault, 2021, p. 320). Both VOD and OTT are terms discussed in Chapter 3.

While the term platform is more commonly understood in terms of a computer operating system, MacOS for Apple products or Windows for PCs and or sites online which have a programmable function to users (Bogost and Montfort, 2009), it is used here to describe the mediums which distribute online content, such as Twitch and YouTube. For the purposes of this study a platform denotes a distributor of other people’s content, an aggregator, an avenue for communication not a producer of original content. Social media sites such as Twitter, Reddit, Facebook and Discord are also defined in this study as platforms; they are aggregators and distributors, but not producers.

The term publisher is used to denote any online site which publishes content for consumers which constitutes news, features, live and/or pre-recorded programmes. The newspapers and broadcasters described above as mainstream media are therefore publishers. Premier League football club websites are also defined for the purposes of this study as publishers as these sites produce news and features. The term is also used to refer to video gaming companies responsible for designing and launching esports titles and tournaments which also produce news and features, live and/or pre-recorded programmes. EA Sports, the owners of the game *FIFA Series*, is therefore referred to as a publisher.

**Chapter 3**

Bridging the Gap: Exploring Esports, Journalism, and Broadcast Media in the Emerging Field of Esports Research

This review of the current state of knowledge on esports is split into three broad areas: (i) research concerning esports and journalism; (ii) esports and sport broadcast media and (iii) diffusion of innovation theory and how this has informed the research question and the underpinning of enquiry. Despite a growing body of work on esports, there has been little research drawing together journalism, esports and broadcast media. Due to the paucity of academic enquiry into esports, this study also draws on good quality industry literature where relevant.

Two academic journals have launched in the past couple of years indicating growing interest from scholars; *The International Journal of esports*, 2020[[3]](#footnote-4) and *The International Journal of eSports Research*, 2021[[4]](#footnote-5). This suggests esports is beginning to define itself as a distinct field. Further evidence that this is an emerging and fertile area of study is the *Esports Research Network*, founded in 2019[[5]](#footnote-6). Launched in Cologne at an ESL event (formerly known as the Electronic Sports League and globally one of the largest esports events’ companies), the *Esports Research Network (ERN)* brings together esports researchers internationally whilst building a useful repository for peer-reviewed literature. When the ERN began curating esports research in 2019, the number of articles was in single digits. Four years later, the database is showing more than 1,000 research papers and the ERN has hosted a second international conference (2022) focusing on creating a sustainable esports sector, at the Jönköping International Business School in Sweden.

Prior to the two journal launches research on esports has had to find its home across a number of different disciplines. The range of journals which have accepted submission on esports-focused research is diverse. For example, *Nutrients*, a journal dedicated to research on human nutrition has esports research concerned with improving the health of esports players, or the journal for *International Gambling Studies*, which is attracting increasing numbers of esports submissions as gambling is becoming a particular issue for the esports sector, or the *Maryland Journal of International Law*, looking at governance within the sector, which to date has been unregulated. Equally esports research can be found in journals which include studies on media convergence, *Media Culture and Society*, *Communication and Sport*, *The Journal of Consumer Culture* and *Games and Culture*.

Indeed, the far-reaching scope of esports research has in itself been the focus of scholarly attention. Reitman et al. (2019) reflect the diversity of research by identifying seven academic disciplines that have an interest in the topic in a review of esports literature from 2002 through to 2018. These seven disciplines are: business, sports science, cognitive science, informatics, law, media studies and sociology. Building on this taxonomy, scholars Cranmer et al. (2021) investigated the most-used categories to describe esports research to date. The categories identified by the group are: gaming and culture, sports management, psychology and philosophy, socio-cultural, computer science, marketing, health, economics. Both the diversity of disciplines and the variety of categories used, demonstrate what has been identified as a key challenge for esports both within academia and within industry, that of finding a definition of the term esports in a way which is universally accepted.

Since the launch of *The International Journal of esports*, *The International Journal of eSports Research* and the *Esports* *Research Network*, there is evidence the study of esports is becoming more prominent in the increasing number of Calls for special issues of journals outside of the sector. In 2021 The Journal of *Media Businesses* called for submissions to a special issue to be published towards the end of 2022 on *Disruption by esports: the Digital Transformation of Media Businesses*. This issue aims to answer questions relating to the hybrid nature of esports and to investigate the role of esports in providing an understanding of future media audiences. This line of enquiry will be of particular relevance to interest to this doctoral study. (At the time of writing this issue is yet to be published.)

**3.2. Journalism and esports: co-support or conflict?**

Esports as a specific area of journalism has only really been prevalent in the past decade and can be correlated to the launch of endemic esports publications. The term ‘endemic esports publications’ is used to refer to those publications which have launched specifically to cover the sector. This is in comparison to publications producing esports content but not founded to cover the sector specifically. Examples of endemic esports publications in the UK include: *Esports Insider* and *The Esports Observer*. Both of these publications launched in 2015, prior to this, esports content had been covered by various different types of publications and incorporated within sections on gaming, technology, entertainment and sports by generalist publishers.

While covering esports specifically is a relatively new phenomenon, it has its roots in gaming journalism. The earliest content covering video gaming can be seen in computing magazines in the 70’s, in the form of single column articles similar in style to a buyer’s guide (Perreault 2019). Content was produced by tech journalists and the early computing magazines were trade rather than consumer. *Play Meter* (1974) in the US is an example of an early publication carrying video gaming content. In the 80s we see the launch of specialised gaming magazines in print and the start of game publishers taking control of their own journalistic content. It is also where there is a change in focus for the journalism, a move away from tech journalists writing for trade publications towards journalists being employed directly by manufacturers of gaming consoles such as Nintendo’s Entertainment System (1985) and Sega’s Master System (1986).

This is a significant change because it is a juncture where content becomes commercially-driven in comparison to being independent editorial; content which can be described as ‘churnalism’. The term coined by BBC journalist Wassem Zakir, as referenced by Harcup in *Journalism* (2015), originally used to describe content reliant on news wires at the expense of original reporting, was adapted by journalist Nick Davies to describe news content generated from press releases. Davies argues in *Flat Earth News* (2009) that the pressure to produce content quickly and cheaply has led to a decline in the quality of journalism, with many news outlets simply regurgitating press releases or recycling content from other sources. This accurately describes the practice of journalists working on publications of console owners in the 80’s, and as the findings from this study will demonstrate, is a practice replicated in contemporary esports journalism.

In the 90s we see the creation of specialist gaming websites covering all aspects of video gaming, including competitive play, and a decline in specialist printed magazines. The earliest coverage of competitive gaming by a non-specialist consumer magazine can be found in the *Wall Street Journal (1997).* The *Quake* tournament covered by the WSJ was the first to offer a high value prize. High enough to attract the attention of mainstream media in the US. The prize of a red Ferrari was donated by the game’s developer John Carmack and the winner Dennis ‘Thresh’ Fong was the focus of the article by the *Wall Street Journal*. From the point at which high value prizes are on offer, it can be argued that content becomes more about entertainment through the spectacle of tournaments rather than the perfunctory technology-focused evaluations of a game’s performance or the specification of the hardware and marks the point when competitive gaming transitions from pastime to profession.

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| Timeline  Description automatically generated  *Source: Filotrani, 2021* |

Fig 2.2. Trajectory of esports journalism

As the gaming/esports sector starts to establish itself, media coverage can be seen to move from generalised computing to specialist gaming magazines, and then online to niche websites.

It is at this juncture a distinction starts to emerge between video game content and esports content and we see journalists publishing on blogs and fanzines using community driven platforms such as Twitter (2006) and Reddit (2005) as sources for ‘news’. Once esports begins to establish itself as a sector discrete from video gaming, endemic publishers start to launch – *Dexerto* and *The Esports Observer* in 2015 are examples. Contemporary esports journalism comprises of community platforms such as Reddit or Twitch, independent news *Esports Insider* or *esportsnews.co.uk* and in-house gaming publishers such as Activision Blizzard or Epic Games. In addition to established publishers, there are many independent content creators and influencers who cover esports through podcasts, streaming, and social media such as Tyler "Ninja" Blevins: a popular streamer with more than 18 million followers on his Twitch channel, or Imane "Pokimane" Anys the top female streamer on Twitch with 9 million followers (Patterson, 2023). Many esports teams and organisations have their own content creation teams such as FaZe Clan or Cloud9.

Although there has been an increase in the numbers of research papers on esports and the range of disciplines now looking at esports, the focus on journalism is significant by its absence. To date, the only other academic study to explore journalism and esports, is by scholars Gregory and Mildred Perreault (2021). The focus of this study differs significantly from Perreault’s as their focus is media coverage of esports in the US rather than mainstream media in the UK. The two studies are however highly complementary and together provide a transatlantic overview of esports journalism. This UK-focused study will provide an important British perspective which will assist in augmenting and balancing this fast-growing area of study.

In the US G and M Perreault evidence that esports presents an “attractive avenue to a new audience for business, sports and gaming journalists. The audience interest is understandable given the financial vibrancy of the hobby” (Perrault, 2021, p. 303). Referring to esports as a “hobby” is depreciative and somewhat at odds with their findings, that is that the sector has monetary value, it has cultural value and it has entertainment value. Nevertheless, their research seeks to answer a central research question: ‘How is esports covered in US journalism?’ The research question covers some similar grounds to this study, albeit from a US perspective rather than a UK perspective as already noted, and with a focus on business journalism compared to sports and mainstream broadcasters and newspapers, as is the concern of this research, but there is a fundamental difference. The emphasis of Perrault’s research is on *how* the esports sector is being covered in the US by business media. Conversely the concern here is not *how*, but rather, what is preventing the esports sector being covered by mainstream media in the UK.

Using a qualitative methodology, Discourse Analysis, of 406 esports news articles from 2018 – 2020, the Perreault study finds that in the US, esports is treated thematically as “(1) an object of commerce, (2) an object of culture and international affairs, and (3) an object of entertainment” (Perreault, 2021, p. 309). This thematic framework was derived by analysing “a wide range of mainstream US journalism sources” (Perreault, 2021, p. 313), namely *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *Forbes* and *Business Insider*. Accepting their early finding that there are three ‘functions’ of esports and then subsequently analysing how the mainstream media in the US is addressing these three functions lead them to conclude that esports is predominantly covered by business journalists. This is despite the fact that for business journalists “esports represents a topic that would typically be considered in lifestyle journalism — given that both gaming and sports are predominantly lifestyle specialties” (Perreault, 2021, p. 304). This conclusion is however based on three out of the four publishers in their overall sample being business publications, so it follows that business rather than lifestyle journalism was most prevalent. What is interesting to note when taking into consideration the contention over whether or not esports is in fact a sport, that this discourse is not a deliberation for these scholars in their summation of what esports represents to journalists.

The Perreaults’ findings point to a concentration of business journalism over sports and entertainment journalism in the US, particularly in the types of coverage of the esports sector by mainstream North American publications. While Perreaults’ results clearly show esports coverage predominates within business by mainstream media in the US, in the UK, the data shows the majority of esports coverage in mainstream media is found within sports, not business, furthermore it is the endemic esports media where the concentration of business and finance news concerning esports is to be found, not in mainstream media as the findings from this study attest. They conclude that esports coverage is becoming normalized in mainstream media and that the pandemic acted as an agent of change in moving the sector towards mainstream sport. Their finding is not supported by the data found in this study. The variations in the data and the subsequent conclusions drawn make for an interesting comparison and lead to a conclusion – for the first time - that there are a number of significant differences in the approach of US media to UK media in covering esports.

It is surprising how scant the research around the role of journalism within esports is. This study therefore makes an important and timely contribution to what we know. The terms ‘journalist’ and ‘journalism’ are significant by their absence in the vast majority of journal articles concerning esports. In Johnson and Woodcock’s *Work, Play, and Precariousness: An Overview of the Labour Ecosystem of esports (*2021*),* for example,there is not a single reference to either term, despite the focus of the research being the identification of roles that make up the esports’ labour market currently, with additionally a particular emphasis on the labour market for esports’ broadcast media. The discovery of this curious omission of both words in esports research has led to postulations about the relevancy of these terms in contemporary society and a conclusion that there is a current need to redefine them. What does the word journalist mean to wider society? Esports journalism exists, as in there are esports publications covering the sector employing people to produce content. Why is there no mention of journalist or journalism as an avenue of employment? Are the defining characteristics for the role of journalist, those that Journalism Studies has continually reinforced still relevant? Answers to these questions have importance for esports publishers, for scholars, and also for higher education. Characteristics which define the role within the frame of a traditional newsroom include adherence to a set of news values anchored on the three key pillars of journalism: accuracy, fairness and objectivity (Harcup and O’Neill 2017). The question arises whether using these parameters to define ‘traditional’ journalism and a journalist act as a barrier to including the ‘newswork’ (Deuze and Witschge, 2017) being conducted by esports staff. Is this also a barrier to giving formal recognition to contentious formats such as blogging as journalism? Blogging is a format seen by some scholars as having ‘poached’ areas of otherwise neglected journalism (Lowery 2006). Blogging has particular resonance for esports.

The findings from this study would suggest that journalism within esports is something other than what is understood by traditional values and practices of journalists in mainstream media in the UK lending support to conclusions that “we have to revisit the question of what journalism is for conceptual considerations …. Given the increasingly fragmented, networked, and atypical nature of the labor market for newswork” (Deuze and Witschge, 2017, p. 168). What is starting to be acknowledged by researchers is that how journalists have been described in the past does not accurately describe the vast majority of those working in news and newswork today, mainstream or otherwise.

Furthermore, the growing relevance of infomediary platforms, platforms such as Google, Twitter and Youtube where the function is on the distribution of content rather than the production, demonstrates an emphasis on how far and wide content can be spread. As such, the merit of a journalistic piece is often weighed by its reach rather than its substance (Siapera, 2013). Consequently, journalists, be it those on contract or freelancers, find themselves building personal distribution channels on social media platforms. Their professional value tethered not just to their journalistic skills, but also to the breadth of their distribution capabilities. The blurring of boundaries between different roles and tasks and the increased emphasis on audience engagement and platforms of distribution means traditional distinctions between reporters, editors, and producers are becoming less relevant (Deuze and Witschge, 2017).

This line of enquiry – what are these new kinds of journalism? - is examined in 2014 in the *Future of Journalist Work* report by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (Rottwilm, 2014). The report very clearly identifies journalists as working within different parameters in contemporary society. Of particular interest to this study is the identification of the entrepreneurial aspect to the profession that has evolved following the democratisation of the publishing process through content management systems such as WordPress, an aspect discussed later in Chapter 6. The report’s findings which include an emphasis on contemporary journalists using blogs to ‘sell’ their work contributes to that discussion; what constitutes journalism, furthermore, what is entrepreneurial journalism? “The new entrepreneurial form of labour involves journalists establishing their own small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to produce content, establishing their own distribution mechanisms through websites and blogs, and syndicating their content to other firms“ (Rottwilm, 2014, p. 4). Esports ‘newswork’ is not mentioned here as an area of journalism that is given scant currency.

Even the fairly recent edited collection - *The Language of Journalism* (Smith and Higgins, 2020) - doesn’t include esports in its ‘genres and modes’ section. It merely includes a framework of news values drawn from Galtung and Ruge (1965) Bell (1991) and Harcup and O’Neill (2017) “to explore how journalistic language articulates these news values in the various genres and modes by which ‘news’ is spread by the media” (Smith and Higgins, 2020, p. 27). Noticeable by its absence is also the omission in *The Language of Journalism* of gaming as a genre of journalism. It does include, however, sports journalism.

The book is divided by top level genres of journalism: broadcast, magazine, newspaper, sports and digital. This way of categorising journalism is in of itself interesting. Sports is an anomaly in this list. It is a topic area rather than a medium as are the other categories. Sport is singled out for distinction because of the sense of liveness – sports being a particular area of content requiring the management of live play. In the light of this, the omission of any mention of gaming or live streaming platforms such as Twitch; is intriguing. This suggests either a lack of interest or a lack of awareness of gaming and esports as legitimate within Journalism Studies. This is surely a missed opportunity to discuss the differences between sport and esports journalism, particularly considering the findings here, which demonstrate the existence of an exciting new genre of newswork. There is a high level of complexity in the style of live commentary for esports, as discussed in Chapter 5, which is worthy of study. Also worth noting is evidence of the increasing redundancy of match reports in a media environment where everything can be accessed on demand and by the changes live streaming platforms have had on the practice of journalists covering gaming, as explored by in *The impacts of live streaming and Twitch.tv on the Video Game Industry (*Johnson and Woodcock, 2019)

Johnson and Woodcock (2019) argue the advent of live streaming has been a major force in changing the games industry, in a variety of ways, in terms of game play, game design, and in game reviews. This is argued by them through an analysis of the interaction the platform Twitch offers, as just one example of its impact. ‘Game Reviews’ a peculiarity of gaming journalism have been integral to the launch of new games since the 1970’s. Before the advent of Twitch and other streaming platforms opportunities for self-publishing to individual streamers were non-existent. Game reviews were articulated through the capture of screenshots of a game or video clips of key functions or game play strategies. If the game review was a video, clips of the game were usually accompanied by a monologue of the merits or demerits of the game title by a journalist.

On Twitch, the review takes “the form of a dialogue” (Johnson and Woodcock, 2019, p. 675). Interaction between the community is offered through Internet Relay Chat (IRC), and the streamer (the person broadcasting themselves on a live stream) is able to play the game for others who are watching, highlighting the best and worst bits of the game. The review thus becomes more aligned to that of a game demo – a live demonstration of the game by the streamer. The direction of the review is guided by the viewer of the live stream through questions and comments in the chatbox (the IRC). The streamer is able to respond to the viewer and demonstrate techniques through live play, making the review something much more dynamic. This fundamental change in dynamic has significance not only in the changing form of the review but also in its function. A game review in this mode has significance for the game publishers, who are able to capitalise on extending the advertising reach popular streamers offer through their subscribers and viewers, leading very often to streamers negotiating lucrative deals in exchange for playing the game publishers’ newly-released games. The game review, a distinct format for a game journalist, has been made more relevant on streaming platforms because of the possibility of interaction with audience members. What was once firmly in the domain of the game journalist is now in an area much less well-defined with the possibility of streamers being paid to review, denoting a change in the boundaries between editorial and commercial and a blurring of the traditional role of the journalist.

The seeming erosion of defined roles for journalists, which the data finds to be of particular relevance within esports can be attributed to a number of causes. One disruptor is the impact technology has had on the production and distribution of content evidenced in the changing form and purpose of the game review on Twitch. Another reason can be attributed to the decline in revenue precipitated through the transference of news from print to online publishing. This decline is the result of a combination of lost advertising together with an audience expectant of ‘free’ content online, causing cost-cutting exercises in news organisations. News desks running on a shoe-string staff have been forced into a reliance on pre-packaged stories from public relations companies to populate the content needed to fill a newspaper or a television news broadcast, as documented by Justin Lewis et al in their comprehensive research into the activities of public relations and news agencies into ‘quality’ news providers in the UK in 2006. The conclusion of which was: “the journalistic processes of news gathering and news reporting in which any meaningful independent journalistic activity by the media is the exception rather than the rule” (Lewis et al., 2008, p. 17).

The practice of using press releases to generate news sees the role of the journalist move from one whose central function is to investigate and break news to repurposing content more aligned to the role of a copy editor – reworking public relations (PR) content to fit the housestyle and focus of the publication they are working for. It is worth noting, in the light of the previous discussions that the notion of investigation has been for many scholars the cornerstone of what defines the role of a journalist (Cancela et al., 2021) and is often used to denote ‘quality journalism’ (Aucoin, 2005, p. 85). While the focus of Lewis et al is to document the use of content from PR companies on mainstream media within a given period in the UK, it is interesting to observe the omission of any reference to the corporate ownership of that content (where the content derives from) and the impact this has on the news agenda. The focus is instead on the agencies; the mediators.

A far more pertinent focus, particularly for esports, is not on the role of PR agencies and the pervasive use of press releases to generate content (which is eroding the role of the journalist and what we understand by the term journalism) but the corporate ownership of content by the game publishers. The role the game publishers play as employers of journalists is having a significant impact on access to information. As gatekeepers of news, the publishers are affecting both the types of content covering the sector and how the content is produced. This is because an esports title, unlike a professional sport which has many different stakeholders, is controlled by just one company; the game publisher. To use EA Sports and *FIFA* *Series* by way of illustration. As the publisher, EA Sports has control over the game, the competition (through licensing tournament rights), and the production (through licensing broadcast rights). Since EA Sports owns the *FIFA* game, they can modify the rules quickly. Additionally, EA Sports holds the license for all official *FIFA* tournaments, has the authority to determine who can create *FIFA*-related content and how *FIFA* events are organised, and decides which channels can stream the tournaments. In short, EA Sports owns both the production and the distribution. This control of information by the game publishers is determinative of what can be covered and by whom. An esports reporter who is employed in-house by game publishers therefore is employed by the very organisation which should be the subject of scrutiny and rather than investigating institutional issues is confined to producing content from official releases.

This trend of game publisher employing journalists directly to cover tournaments and titles they own, is highlighted by scholars as becoming commonplace in traditional sports (Fry 2011; Bellamy 2012). In the last two decades, sports companies have gradually shifted towards hiring their own sports reporters instead of depending on traditional broadcast sports media and newspapers to cover their desired content in a specific manner. Examples of this can be seen across most major sports. Mercedes-AMG Petronas for example employs broadcast journalists to cover them through the Formula One season or pick any ‘Premier League’ Club in the UK such as Manchester City, and there will be a head of editorial and a team of journalists employed to cover the club as they compete throughout the year. In this way the sports companies have ownership over the coverage and are in control of the messaging. This can be seen to be analogous to journalists covering video games being employed by the console companies of the eighties (noted in Chapter 2) and esports journalists of today being employed by the game publishers or being directly engaged by esports teams.Being employed in-house as a reporter in this way brings inherent issues (Mirer, 2018). The situation breeds conflict between editorial integrity and ensuring commercial viability, compromising the credibility of news and ultimately, if not eroding, certainly diluting, the role of the journalist.

The profession of traditional sports journalists is in crisis (Weedon et al. 2016). Sports desks in mainstream media are not just fighting against an inherent lower place in the hierarchy of news (McEnnis, 2018), they now find themselves in competition with this new breed of in-house reporters: a growing market of hybrid journalists employed and sustained by sports teams and sports organisations, not newspapers or broadcasters. As Bellamy (2012) identifies, “the larger sports entities now have the market power to create and economically exploit their own media companies” (Bellamy, 2012, p. 50) employing journalists and publishing on their own platforms. These journalists sit firmly between editorial and commercial, straddling news and entertainment and public relations, which raises questions about the credibility of sports news and questions over organisational objectivity (Mirer, 2018).

That esports journalism as an area of focus has been given little consideration to date by researchers, is perhaps unsurprising given the relative lack of attention sports journalism has enjoyed historically within the field of Journalism Studies (Weedon et al. 2016). Much of the research on sports journalism forms part of wider considerations around the convergence environment of news work or tends to focus on the mechanics of how to cover sport. Murray et al (2011) examine what new skills are needed for print sports journalists producing content online, as does Ketterer et al. (2013), extending this line of enquiry to include social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. It is worth noting, that while Ketterer et al. acknowledge that converged media is of central importance to sports journalists in their research, there is no reference to esports, nor to computer-mediated events central to the sector and therefore the skills needed to cover this emerging market. There is a gap revealed here between approaches to esports and to sports in terms of the labour market. The role of the esports journalist is neither identified within esports as an area of employment (Johnson and Woodcock, 2021) nor is it identified with sports.

What starkly underlines the relative lack of attention sports journalism has attracted within academia is an analysis of the collection of papers presented at the *Future of Journalism*, biennial conference both in 2019 and in 2021. In 2019 the conference was themed around *Innovations, Transitions and Transformations* (Ogbebor and Carter, 2021). Notable by their absence was any reference to esports or gaming or indeed live streaming in any of the abstracts. Out of the 196 papers presented, there were just four that were sports-related. Two on the impact of AI technology on creating sports reports with a focus on football, one on the Paralympics, addressing tensions between commercial and editorial that broadcasters face on which disabilities are made more visible than others and one on the coverage of disabled athletes and sports women on Twitter.

At the 2021 conference the representation of sports within journalism was even more stark. Out of 214 papers presented over the course of the 3-day conference, there was only one considering sports journalism and sports media, and that paper was mine (Filotrani, 2021a). The focus of the conference in 2021 was *Overcoming Obstacles in Journalism* (Cardiff University, 2021), with a particular reference to how journalists have responded to the challenges presented by the COVID pandemic. Given the disruption the sports media sector faced in a year of global lockdowns which saw a consequential growth of live streaming as a method of distribution and esports tournaments in lieu of live sporting events, it is perplexing that this researcher’s paper was the only one to examine sports in any form.

The fact that there are not more scholars considering sports journalism within academia is perhaps a reflection of how sports journalists have traditionally been confined to the ‘toy department’ of newsrooms (McEnnis, 2018). Sports Desks have attracted criticism for the types of superficial content generated together with a sense of insularity perpetuated by those employed as sports journalists. The *International Sports Press Survey 2011* of 80 newspapers in 22 countries, for example, found sports journalism remains mainly fixated on results, typically relies on a narrow range of sources and is still mostly produced by and mainly about men (Horky and Nieland, 2013). Research also supports a perception that sports journalism tends to favour sensationalised stories of individual villains at the expense of institutional examination. A prevalence of a ‘hero vs. villain’ narrative in sports coverage, where individual players or coaches are portrayed as either heroes or villains based on their on-field performance or off-field behaviour. This can lead to a focus on individual wrongdoing. This focus on sensation often obfuscating the real issues facing the industry. How Sepp Blatter has been covered regarding corruption within *FIFA* is a good example (Rowe, 2016). The reliance on match results and play-by-play commentating is perceived to be at the expense of investigative reporting, which as has already been noted is seen as a mark of ‘quality journalism’ (Aucoin, 2005, p. 85). Following this line of thought, perhaps the lack of research submitted to the *Future of Journalism* indicates that sports journalism is not considered journalism.

**3.3. Broadcasting: context for esports**

The broadcasting landscape in the West has been in a state of flux since the launch of a number of different streaming platforms. The ‘phase of proliferation’ as researchers Ihlebæk, Syvertsen and Ytreberg (2013) refer to the period of the birth of multiple different platforms such as YouTube and Twitch, has compromised traditional broadcasting. Audiences have moved from being physically tied to a television box for watching programmes to being free to access content distributed via the internet on multiple devices. Thereby challenging the very concept of linear television (Lotz 2016). As a “cornerstone of the television industry” (Hutchins et al. 2019, p. 976) live sport has been particularly impacted. It is not relevant for this study to document the history of sport on television from its inception, nor the role this medium has played in the distribution of sport to reach a local, national, and global audience (Barnett, 1990; Rowe, 1996). Nor is it necessary to chart the process of deregulation of terrestrial television seen in the 1980s and 1990s, nor the impact the introduction of subscription services such as SKY (Galperin, 2004) has had on the subsequent “fragmentation of audiences” (Mikos, 2019, p. 10). However, it is pertinent to contextualise the landscape of broadcasting sport in the UK and to give particular reference to football in order to situate esports. Understanding what is happening within sports broadcasting to date highlights a number of challenges and opportunities that the sector of esports and live streaming platforms such as Twitch pose to legacy broadcasters.

It is undisputed within the field of contemporary media research that the landscape of television broadcasting has changed significantly since the advancement of technologies that enable television to be distributed via the internet (Lotz, 2016). One emergent technology that has proved particularly disruptive to linear broadcasting is live streaming, in particular to the paradigmatic case of football broadcasts as they are highly pertinent to this study. Indeed, the launch of live streaming platforms YouTube and Twitch, in 2006 and 2007 respectively, can be seen as indicators of this change in audience behaviour. To illustrate: pre live streaming a report produced by Ofcom for the Commission of the European Communities into the ‘English Premier League’ (EPL) in the UK noted: “viewers appear to be tuning in to watch more live match programmes, with the average audience reach increased by about one third in the past four seasons” (Ofcom, 2006). This increase was recorded as approximately 9 million in 2001/02 to 11 million in 2004/05. A decade or so later the English Premier League viewing figures show a steep decline suggesting there was a fundamental shift in patterns of media consumption. According to the data platform Statista the combined viewership of SKY TV and BT Sport, the two broadcasters with the rights to air live football matches in 2016, recorded a peak average of just 1.5 million. This was the average based on the total number of viewers for the whole year. Compare this to the number of viewers recorded by the Broadcasters Audience Research Board (BARB[[6]](#footnote-7)) for just a single match broadcast on *Match of the Day Live* on BBC 1 in September 2005, before the launch of live streaming platform YouTube. This single programme pulled in a peak of 7.5 million viewers. YouTube, it is worth noting, has particular relevance for football sports audiences as it is a platform that has a growing audience of football fans and used by football clubs to both access and stream live matches and broadcast packaged content (as examined in Chapter 5).

The ‘English Premier League’ is in some ways unique, given its ownership over broadcasting rights since the League’s formation in 1992, (Boyle and Haynes, 2004), but it is not an anomaly. Pre-pandemic all major sports broadcast in the UK were reporting declining viewing figures. In 2017, across its live channels, broadcaster SKY saw average viewing figures falling by 14 percent (Bond, Fildes, and Ahmed, 2017). On free-to-air television in the UK - a third of Formula 1’s audience - disappeared between 2008 and 2016 (Collantine, 2016), and the ‘US Open’, a key event in the sporting calendar for television in the UK lost 75% of its audience in 2016 (Murray, 2016). Evens (2017) pinpoints the Rio summer Olympics as another major indicator of the declining viewership of live sporting events: down by 15% on the previous Olympics in London. Adding to this general downward trend came the outbreak of COVID19, which brought its own challenges. The consequences of lost revenue because of global bans on live sporting events during the pandemic has put an economic strain on sports broadcasters already facing a declining viewership (Reimer, 2020; Rogers, 2021).

These viewer ratings have to be caveated by the acknowledgment that they are not like for like comparisons, therefore comparing performance over different data sets can only be indicative not an exact comparison. Free-to-air television is a very different model to pay-per-view and subscription channels for example. This becomes significant when using this data for valuing a product, both for its economic and cultural value. As Lotz points out with reference to internet-distributed television “the common practices of portals (platforms) to self-gather and retain data about the frequency of viewing allows only the portal any sense of the value created by each media good” (2016, p. 138) The opacity of the data from online platforms such as YouTube and Twitch creates possibilities for sector inflation, a discussion picked up from the findings in Chapter 5.

The systems for measuring audiences in a traditional broadcasting landscape are challenged in what is now a much more complex media environment. For example, current global television audience measuring as investigated by scholars González-Neira, et al. “does not take into account the new television players like over the top television (OTT) video services, leaving out a significant part of consumption” (2020, p. 16). In the UK, BARB, the organisation responsible for audience measurement, does now collect data across both linear and non-linear television, what it calls BVOD, broadcast video on demand services, on smart phones, television sets, PCs and tablets, but the data is generated from UK households only. When evaluating viewer data to consider the popularity of a programme in the internet-distributed television landscape of content that is both produced and consumed internationally, having ratings for UK households is not enough. As González-Neira, et al., point out, there is a need to “homogenize audience measurement tools, methods and formats across countries to be able to compare data accurately and easily” (González-Neira, Quintas-Froufe and Gallardo-Camacho, 2020, p. 16).

Additionally, the growing popularity of using social media metrics and what is commonly referred to as Big Data, creates another layer of complexity in that comparing cross-platforms also means across different sample sizes. Nielsen, the US equivalent of BARB, is a good example. Its Nielsen Twitter Television Ratings (NTTRs) uses vast data sets alongside small group sampling. This represents a major shift in ratings methodologies (Kelly, 2017, p. 114). The problem with using vast quantities of data, is that connections can be made in lots of different directions. What can be determined from the data depends on the context. Current television audience measuring (TAM) systems do not contextualize the data. Boyd and Crawford (2011) explain in their paper on the limitations and challenges of using and accessing Big Data from the internet, that “taken out of context, data lose meaning and value. Context matters. When two datasets can be modelled in a similar way, this does not mean that they are equivalent or can be analyzed in the same way” (Boyd and Crawford, 2011, p. 8)

England’s game against Sweden in the ‘World Cup’ quarter final in 2018 on the BBC, provides a useful illustration. This broadcast of a single match received nearly 20 million viewers. Compare this with the match average for the same year, on subscription service BT Sport. The average number of viewers per match in 2018 on BT Sport was 400,000 viewers. The viewing figures for a single match on the BBC do not compare easily with a single match on BT Sport. Comparing single match viewers across a free-to-air channel compared to a subscription channel needs contextualizing before conclusions can be drawn about what the numbers tell us. We can't determine from the number of viewers if the high views for the England match against Sweden were due to the distribution platform, the fact that the content was free and broadcast on a terrestrial TV channel, the prime-time broadcast, or the nature of the match being a ‘World Cup’ qualifier. Equally, can we assume that the relatively low viewing figures for the average match watched on BT Sport is because this is a subscription service compared to free-to-air, or because the figure is a match average so accounts for lower league games alongside Premier League games? Evaluating the popularity of different methods of distribution for live sport, or indeed the popularity of live sport as a genre, from quantitative data of viewer numbers, without qualitative data providing context, is problematic. This methodological challenge is addressed in Chapter 4.

Notwithstanding these issues, responses to low viewing figures for major sports both in the UK and in the US have provoked wider discussions about the future viability of live sports for broadcasters. Contrary to a narrative constructed around the suggestion that live sports is ‘dead’, Evens (2017) argues that sports broadcasting is instead in a state of flux. Sports associations and media companies alike are having to explore strategies to address managing content production in this multiplatform, multiscreen era and that rather than technological determinative interpretations Evens argues where the new equals better, emerging and legacy media need to find a new balance where they can co-exist. Scholar Sorensen (2015) agrees. The changing viewing habits as indicated by the declining viewers on television requires a reimagining of what constitutes live. His research, *The Revival of Live TV: Liveness in a Mulitplatform Context*, explores strategies for addressing the declining television audience through a series of interviews with multiplatform executives at the BBC and Channel 4 between 2010 and 2014. The strategies Sorensen sets out however are built around a presumption that television ‘does’ live better than any other platform. A presumption that is now very much in contention with live content being streamed by nonlinear internet platforms, such as YouTube and Twitch.

The expeditious development of technology over the past two decades has changed the viewing patterns of television audiences. This change has been accentuated by claims that the “live broadcasting of media events gives the TV networks a clear competitive edge over the streamed content and video on demand services available from online providers such as YouTube, Netflix and Prime Video” (Sorensen, 2015, p. 382). This is a competitive edge which no longer holds true. Sorensen’s statement has now been eclipsed and is now very far from what he described in 2022. Notably absent in his evaluation of streaming distributors is any mention of the platform Twitch, which launched in 2011.

Core to the strategy proposed by Sorensen to tackle the competitive challenge from streaming platforms is the focus on second screen viewing habits. This concept of the viewer watching television while also being active on a second screen, such as a smart phone, forms the basis around which a broadcaster should be directing their content strategy, he proposed. Sorensen is not alone in this assumption that the second screen might serve as an extension to the primary source (television). Stover and Moner (2013) refer to these second screens as companion devices, suggesting a hierarchy of primary and secondary sources. The problem is that this concept is somewhat reductive when applied to the streaming platform Twitch. Contrary to the picture painted by Sorensen of a viewer watching television (primary source) while at the same time Tweeting on their mobile phone (secondary source), the audience on Twitch has no need for a second screen as the platform is built around the integration of the community and the interaction between the streamer and the viewer. The audience on Twitch has therefore a far more complex relationship with the platform than simply using it to access content in a different way. Compared with television broadcasts where the audience sits outside of a programme looking inwards the audience on Twitch is at the heart of the content. There is an integration with the audience on Twitch that is absent from a television broadcast which leaves the need for a content strategy for second screen viewing redundant. There is no second screen needed. Rather than switching between screens, the audience on Twitch is switching between channels (Spilker et al. 2018). Television broadcasters have to navigate this challenge and to understand that the relationship with the broadcaster (the streamer) and the viewer is direct on Twitch. There is no mediator between producer and consumer.

Things have moved on significantly since the chairman and CEO of Time Warner Jeff Bewkes said: “The digital revolution means television taking over the internet, not the other way round” (Rosenbaum, 2014). Similarly, a quote referenced by Sorensen (2015) from his interview with the BBC’s former Head of Product and Sports, Chris Condron, that: “different devices are simply different content delivery platforms” (Sorenson, 2015, p. 388) really seems to miss the fundamental point, that online streaming platforms such as Twitch are not simply television online and should not be treated as such. The watching and engaging modes for audience-members are entirely different. Twitch as a multifaceted medium, is complex and “far more than just a broadcasting platform” (Wulf et al. 2018, p. 331). Contrary to live events on television where viewers use second screens “Twitch provides several opportunities for social interaction via the chat on the same device and platform. Hence, people do not need to use other devices to check for social interactions” (Wulf, 2018, p. 340).

In light of this it is interesting to consider Lotz’s (2016) assertions around the differences between non-linear and linear viewing, ‘between portals’ as she defines internet platforms such as Twitch and television. For her the portal is a product in its own right and it competes for its audience on the basis of the experience that it offers not simply on the programmes. This is a key difference between a television broadcaster such as the BBC and the platform Twitch. The BBC is sold to its audience by the quality of the programmes on offer, by comparison Twitch is sold to its audience by the quality of the experience on the platform: the access to interact with the community and with the producers of content.

In her examination of the paradigmatic evolution of television in the US Lotz, highlights another key difference between internet-distributed television and legacy broadcasters, pertinent to this study; scheduling. The time constraints “embedded throughout the norms of linear television operation” (Lotz, 2016, p. 136) forces the audience to watch at a specified time. These norms have been established because of the parameters of the medium of distribution; television is a single point transmission which requires scheduling. This form of distribution is entirely different for the audience on streaming platforms where there is no time specificity; audiences can watch what they want, when they want, in other words, ‘time-shift viewing’ (Portilla 2015, p. 78). What Lotz highlights as characteristics associated with linear television – ties to a 24-hour schedule and the delivery of content within windows – are not characteristics of non-linear internet television distribution. In this way linear can be seen to denote time-dependency and non-linear time-independency. Linear requiring scheduling, while non-linear does not.

Following this discourse Twitch as a non-linear, time-independent, distributor should have no need of schedules. However, a lack of consistent scheduling on Twitch, as is explored in Chapter 6, can be to the detriment of viewer engagement. This suggests that there is a middle ground to Lotz’s designation of linear and non-linear television. A middle ground where the characteristics of television intersect with the characteristics of platforms and where the sharing of cultural capital in terms of production could be of value to producers and audiences. The broadcasting of esports events sit in this middle ground, somewhere between linear and non-linear because there is a time-dependency factor for live tournaments and because of the multiplicity of access points and, lastly, the time-independency to access content outside of a live event.

Although Lotz (2016) references the French cultural industries scholar Bernard Miege, who identified the production of a schedule as a central function of the broadcast industry (Miege 1989), there is surprisingly little scholarly literature analysing the impact of scheduling on viewing figures. From the few studies that do exist scheduling is framed as an attempt to “win over and hold on to audiences amidst fierce competition” (Van den Bulck, 2009, p. 321) but, reviewing the history of live sport on television, there are many instances where scheduling has been responsible for not only winning an audience but also in *manufacturing* an interest in a sporting event that otherwise would have gone unnoticed. Channel 4’s development of a cult following for American Football is a case in point (Barnett, 1990). Scheduling is important therefore for engagement and exposure to new genres of content, both of which translate into potential revenue streams. With multiple platforms and devices to access content on scheduling, vertical or otherwise, poses a challenge to broadcasters on linear television and on non-linear platforms.

The decline in television viewers of sports is not just attributable to a dilution of the audience through the launch of competitor live streaming platforms such as YouTube and Twitch, it is also due to the introduction of different business models for over-the-top (OTT) television such as pay-per-view and subscription channels. OTT refers to the ability to deliver video content via the internet, directly to a user’s connected device. These business models adopted by sports companies in response to the emergent technologies of connected devices, including game consoles to smart television sets and smart mobile phones, are challenging the ability of traditional sports media to attract and keep its audience. The ascendency of over-the-top television (OTT) has allowed users to circumnavigate public service broadcasters (PSBs), cable and satellite providers. This has in turn proved disruptive to legacy sports media such as the BBC, as sports companies and leagues are able to bypass traditional broadcasters altogether for both distribution and production of content (Bellamy, 2012). Sports companies no longer dependent on broadcasters to mediate between them and their audience are able to go direct to consumer (DTC). Over-the-top television or internet-distributed television has created a new business model for broadcasting, arguably cutting out the need for mainstream broadcasters altogether. The traditional distributors of live sport are no longer the only avenue for audiences to watch.

Football coverage across Europe provides a paradigmatic case study for how this contemporary landscape of broadcast media is changing. Instead of relying on legacy broadcasters to distribute coverage of live matches, many professional football leagues across Europe have created their own broadcasting companies, adopting a direct-to-consumer strategy. For example, Spain’s ‘La Ligua League’, in partnership with Virgin Media and SKY, has established its own streaming service LaLiguaSportsTV, investing in the production of post-match analysis programmes while also streaming matches live. Equally, France’s professional league the ‘Ligue de Football Professionnel’ (LFP) has an over-the-top service MyLigue. In Germany and in the UK, the leagues are taking a more cautious approach.

The ‘Bundesliga’, in Germany, created a direct-to-consumer platform called the Bundesliga Pass in 2019. The platform has yet to launch citing the pandemic as reasons for the delay. It is poised to offer services internationally, producing packaged digital content and also offering live streaming. Currently the ‘Bundesliga’ continues to maintain its existing broadcast distribution strategy through legacy broadcasters, but the Bundesliga Pass shows that it is ready to adopt a move to a direct-to-consumer approach. The landscape in the UK is somewhat similar to Germany in that there is a continued commitment of the ‘English Premier’ League to stick to the established model for broadcasting. The ‘English Premier League’ is exploring its direct-to-consumer (DTC) strategy but for now it is business as usual – that is selling broadcasting packages to the highest bidders, which it is how it has operated since it formed in 1992, precipitating the move from a free-to-air model to subscription for football fans (Butler and Massey, 2018).

These developments in direct-to-consumer services in football leagues across Europe demonstrate that the relationship between sports companies and legacy broadcasters for live sport is being examined and re-evaluated against the challenges broadcasters are facing over attracting and maintaining an audience. But, for football at least, while the potential revenue generated from selling media rights remains so lucrative, professional leagues such as the ‘Bundesliga’ in Germany and the ‘English Premier League’ in the UK will continue to maintain existing broadcast distribution strategies. Nevertheless, the landscape of broadcast media for sport is changing, of which the arrival of internet giant Amazon into the broadcasting market in 2020, is an illustration.

The ‘English Premier League’, unlike many other European leagues, is yet to set itself up as a broadcaster. Instead, it remains committed to selling broadcasting rights to the highest bidder. The reluctance of the ‘English Premier League’ to commit to launching its own direct-to-consumer platform is understandable given the high value revenue streams it is still able to access through its traditional broadcasting packages, as the table demonstrates. The combined earnings from the sale of ‘English Premier League’ games to BT Sport and SKY Sport alone for the 2019/20 – 2021/22 season is just under £4.5bn. With Amazon Prime Video being awarded live broadcasting rights, however, we are seeing the beginnings of a change in direction and makeup of the broadcasting landscape for sport in the UK. An “historic shift in the global marketplace for sport coverage rights and the media systems through which live content circulates” note Hutchins, Li and Rowe (2019, p. 975). According to industry reports, Amazon entering into the sport broadcast media landscape suggests the partnership has helped increase the ‘English Premier League’s’ reach by a third in the UK (Impey, 2019). It cannot go without mention that Amazon owns Twitch, the biggest live streaming platform in the world currently, and the home to esports.

The partnership between the ‘English Premier League’ and game publisher EA Sports through the creation of the ‘ePremier League’ serves to underline this changing media landscape. This is why this study of the ‘ePremier League’ is pertinent. The broadcast media for this League are the streaming platforms YouTube and Twitch, not legacy sports broadcasters. The creation of the ‘ePremier League’ by the ‘English Premier League’ (EPL) could provide a perfect test bed for a direct-to-consumer strategy for the EPL and for how to navigate the new sport broadcast media.

Esports broadcast media is interesting because it can be seen to embody the space of new sports media. It is direct-to-consumer (DTC) and over-the-top of television (OTT). The major players are the game publishers and the streaming platforms, not the mainstream broadcasters. And yet, competitive gaming has a history of being broadcast on linear television. The first attempts at video games and competitive play on television appeared in the eighties with the first ever video game competition played in a slot on the US programme *That's Incredible* (1982). A decade later the first show completely dedicated to competitive gaming aired on Channel 4 in the UK: *Gamesmaster* (1992) ran until 1998. Only segments in children’s programmes offered an alternative coverage. What is also interesting to note is SKY specifically has a history of trying (and failing) to corner the competitive video games television programming market and as the named media partner for the ‘ePremier League’ since 2019, the broadcaster demonstrates a continued investment in this genre of content.

DirecTV, owned by NewsCorp (and the owners of SKY) launched a televised league called the ‘Championship Gaming Series (CGS)’ in 2006. T.L. Taylor's book *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming* (2015) provides a nuanced look at this event and the tension between grassroots gaming communities and efforts to reach a more mainstream audience. Taylor concludes that success or failure lies in the recognition of the diversity of gaming communities and the different ways in which players and fans engage with esports, rather than an attempt to homogenize or mainstream the culture of gaming. A recognition that DirecTV did not acknowledge. Despite investments in excess of $50m, and two broadcasting partners, one in the UK, BSkyB, and one in China, STARTV, the venture to televise the ‘Championship Gaming Series’ was not a success.

In his industry book, *This is esports (and how to spell it)*, Chaloner, one of the most famous casters[[7]](#footnote-8) on the esports scene to date, points to the inexperience of the mainstream broadcaster with esports as the reason for the televised league’s failure. This coupled with a corresponding lack of understanding of how an esports tournament differs to a traditional sporting event. The results of this study indicate that there have been minimal changes in nearly two decades. Chaloner cites the choice of games for the ‘Gaming Series’, picked by DirecTV to be part of the league as one of the most significant issues. The games selected didn’t have the established community – that is they were recently released with no following. In this selection the broadcaster demonstrated a failure to understand the inherent role the esports community has in the success or failure of a title. The community doesn’t just share opinions about a game, they play it, and by doing so they contribute to its development, as new patches are introduced by publishers as a direct consequence to address how the games are being played.

Chaloner also notes how the broadcaster “butchered the rules” for some games to fit round television conventions such as ad breaks (Chaloner, 2020, p. 66). This desire from the broadcaster for esports games to change in order to suit the current programming formats of linear television, is identified by the esports sector as one of the barriers for esports being covered by mainstream media (discussed in Chapter 5). In the UK, the XLEAGUE.TV launched on SKY (2007), another NewsCorp subsidiary. This was an entire channel of programming dedicated to competitive video gaming and billed as the UK’s first esports television channel with an online platform hosting analysis and news, to accompany the live play on television. Again, questions over the choice of games and the formatting of the programmes resulted in the channel coming off air after just 18 months. The programmes weren’t landing in the adopted style of television sports broadcasts. 2016 saw the launch of the UK’s second attempt at a 24-hour esports television channel, GINX esports TV. SKY has a minor share in this broadcasting company along with ITV, and the channel is accessible on SKY, but not on ITV. The channel shows a combination of live tournaments and pre-recorded programmes. There is no publicly available information on the size of its audience, so there is no way to evaluate the success or failure of this venture. It is a point worth making that esports has been successfully packaged for television audiences in other countries. In South Korea (Dal Yong Jin, 2011) for example, cable television channels have been broadcasting esports regularly for more than 20 years. The first is believed to be a *StarCraft* tournament in 1997 on Ongamenet (now known as OGN), a channel specifically created to cover gaming and esports content and according to *The Esports Playbook: Asia* by Nielsen in 2018, 71 percent of South Korean fans watched esports through linear TV (Pike and Port, 2018). Chaloner’s analysis of esports from an industry perspective provides detail of how the esports sector flirted with the crossover into mainstream broadcasting at the time, by looking to television as the medium to secure the sector’s future. The author concludes the esports sector no longer needs television. A conclusion worth challenging based on the findings from this study.

Part of the reason the esports sector is no longer looking to television for legitimisation could be attributed to the success of the platform Twitch. The platform’s launch in 2011 marks a departure from attempts to position esports on mainstream television, particularly in the UK. Scholar Taylor (2019) ascribes the success of the platform to its function as a centralised place for the diverse and disparate gaming community to come together and a place for live streamed broadcasts, hitherto absent. The growth of live streaming is documented by Taylor in *Watch me Play: Live Streaming Computer Games and the Future of Spectatorship* and while her suggestion that competitive gaming can only be legitimized by being on television is now outmoded, what she argues with regards to Twitch, holds true. Taylor argues the launch of the platform Twitch isn’t merely about the possibilities is affords for the creation of eleagues or for sports companies to leverage live streaming. She argues the significance of the platform is much bigger, it signals fundamental and potentially large-scale changes in broadcasting culture: “game live streaming has become a new form of networked broadcast” (Taylor, 2019, p. 144). As already noted, the birth of over-the-top television and the launch of live streaming platforms, has provided producers a way of bypassing the previous reliance on legacy media to distribute its content. With Twitch esports has not needed television to connect the tournaments with the community.

Taylor usefully highlights the differences between television simply as a distribution platform, compared to Twitch, which acts as an interface for dialogue between audience, broadcasters and player. She also considers how the platform heralds a move from private play (of video games) to public entertainment (through streaming playing those video games to an audience). What Taylor draws attention to specifically that distinguishes Twitch from other streaming platforms is the interaction between the streamers and the audience through the internet relay chat (IRC). This is the chatbox that runs alongside the viewing screen on a Twitch channel providing a space not only for the community to communicate with each other but also for the community to communicate directly with the streamers; justifying why the platform can be considered to be direct-to-consumer. The streamers are able to connect with their viewers, without mediation. Though recent controversies regarding Twitch moderation and banning could challenge this claim. In March 2021, Twitch banned popular streamer, Félix "xQc" Lengyel, for streaming and using slurs during a Twitch Rivals tournament. In January 2021, Twitch removed the PogChamp emote from its platform after the face behind the emote made controversial statements about the U.S. Capitol riots. In December 2020, Twitch banned the account of U.S. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez after she used her Twitch channel to encourage viewers to vote and discuss her policy proposals. These controversies have raised concerns about Twitch's moderation practices and policies, and have led to calls for greater transparency and accountability in platform governance.

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

The role of the streamer, the person broadcasting content live to viewers, is a growing area of research not exclusive to esports. Researchers Wulf et al. explore the importance of the communication between the streamer and the viewer, describing this relationship as ‘quasi parasocial’ (PSR). The term ‘parasocial’ was initially adopted by scholars Horton and Wohl in 1956 to describe the relationship news anchors had with television viewers. Although the news anchors didn’t know each viewer individually the act of being able to look down the camera and address the viewers directly created a sustainable ‘parasocial’ relationship for the viewer. The term ‘parasocial’ referencing a one-sided, pseudo-relationship that individuals develop with the newsreaders. This one-sided relationship involves a sense of emotional attachment or intimacy, even though the individual may have no direct personal interaction or relationship with the media figure. ‘Parasocial’ because it is a relationship that is perceived as social but is not reciprocal. In essence, the individual feels as though they ‘know’ the newsreader on a personal level. Streamers on Twitch also develop this same relationship with the viewers. However, with the key difference that the streamers actually do interact with the viewers. Wulf et al argue that this means “relationships to Twitch streamers are a specific kind of PSR” (Wulf, Schneider and Beckert, 2018, p. 332). Bingham in his article *Talking about Twitch: Dropped Frames and a Normative Theory of New Media Production*, says this relationship is “more akin to a type of friendship, rather than simply a spectator or fan’ and that this ‘relationship cannot be forced or faked” (Bingham, 2017, p. 15).

Johnson and Woodcock (2021) agree in their comparison of the role of streamer to a sports broadcaster. They argue that while sharing many similarities, there is a fundamental difference, “one must work to be liked by the fans of the game” (Johnson and Woodcock, 2021, p. 8). This adds a complicated layer to the broadcast for the streamer, a layer which is arguably missing from a more traditional linear broadcast. The success or failure of a Twitch channel is not reliant solely on the expertise and knowledge of a particular game by the streamer but on something much more precarious, the likeability of that streamer. This has an impact not only because of the repositioning of the pressure to succeed away from a production company or television channel towards the individual streamer instead but also because this repositioning of responsibility challenges the fundamental dynamic between broadcaster (streamer) and audience (viewer). The affordance of the platform to allow direct questions from the community to the streamer, together with the continuous live stream of concurrent comments viewer to viewer from the internet relay chat, can craft and direct the focus of the stream. The audience on Twitch watching esports has therefore power over the broadcast in a way that is not possible for a television audience watching a live sporting event, even with the option to comment live via social media channels. The sports presenters of a live sports broadcast are not responsive to comments and suggestions in real time from their audience. On Twitch streamers are in conversation with their viewers in real time. Furthermore, there is no mediation of what viewers are watching through the instructions of a director sitting in the gallery choosing which cameras to select and when to move a presenter on to another topic. The streamer can be fully autonomous.

Twitch, Johnson and Woodcock (2021) argue, has been instrumental in establishing a labour market in which esports players are able to generate revenue through tournaments and in which streamers, through broadcasting content on their own channels have become aspirational personalities, also able to generate their own revenue. Twitch has made the layer in between play and labour – ‘playbour’ - in some cases imperceptible. The portmanteau was coined by Julian Kücklich in 2005 in *Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry* to describe the changing relationship between work and play in entertainment industries.Johnson and Woodcock conclude that “professional casting and playbour are distinct but essential elements of the esports labour ecosystem” (Johnson and Woodcock, 2021, p. 9).

It must be made clear that within an esports broadcast covering a tournament, there is a production team more aligned to a traditional sports broadcast on television, not just a solo streamer. The production team includes presenters who are called hosts, and commentators, who are called ‘casters’. Casting is a diminutive of the word shoutcaster which derives from the plugin SHOUTcast which allowed you to stream media, particularly audio, over the internet and was used in the early days of esports competitions in South Korea. The term caster refers to the person or persons (usually two) commentating on a game live, similar to the role of sports broadcaster. Alongside the role of the host, there is the role of the observer, which can be seen as a distinguishing factor of an esports broadcast team when comparing to a mainstream sports broadcasting team.

The role of observer can be understood if seen as an extension of the director in live television. The director in the gallery is the person who chooses what the viewer at home sees. This in effect, as already intimated, renders the director as the mediator. The observer role in esports is comparable to that of the director, in that he or she is in control over which camera angles to choose throughout a live play, however, there is a key difference between director and observer. An observer uses a high knowledge of the game to make informed choices about what to show and when to show it, rather than focusing on the visual impact and experience for the television viewer that informs a director’s choice of which camera to select. In this way the mediation is being done by an esports expert rather than a broadcast expert. The focus being on the knowledge of the game that the observer brings. The observer can choose camera angles according to the game play and for this reason needs to be across the whole game. He or she will be anticipating strategy and potential action points, whilst at the same time selecting the scenes which will help interpret the game for the viewer. This is therefore a highly skilled role. The ‘caster’ “requires a deep knowledge of the game in order to respond to (and even predict) interesting gameplay occurrences that the camera should focus on” (Johnson and Woodcock, 2021, p. 6).

Another key difference between esports broadcasts and more traditional sporting events on television is that there isn’t often a single focus in the same way as a football match. There can be multiple locations where live action can be happening simultaneously. For example in a *League of Legends*’ match the observer is required to be attentive to a whole map, keeping across battles which could be happening concurrently. It is the observer’s knowledge of the game that makes the choice of where to take the viewers next possible. In a football match the cameras follow the ball, and while there may be a choice of angles to select ranging from overviews of the whole pitch to close ups on individual players, it is single focus; the action is always centred around the ball. It is in this sense a single dimension compared to esports which is a multidimensional experience.

Another competitor to legacy broadcast media, Twitter, has been extensively explored by scholars working within the field of Sport Communication. Kevin Hull and Norman Lewis’s article *Why Twitter Displaces Broadcast Sports Media: A Model* (Hull and Lewis, 2014) makes a causal link between Twitter and the declining audience for television sport broadcasts. They conclude “the appointment-viewing model on which television is based but that fits less well in a more fluid society may have more to do with shrinking audiences than alternatives sources such as Twitter” (Hull and Lewis 2014, p. 27). Their argument is based around the immediacy Twitter offers, which is highly compelling for audience-members. Though somewhat limited (the study was written pre the advent of live streaming) it still has contemporary resonance in scholarly discussions around esports and sports fans. The digital natives that form the esports community is the audience that has seen rapid growth. From an audience of a few thousand in 1997 to the 500 million to date (Pannekeet, 2019), the rising trajectory of esports viewers has been phenomenal.

The chart below shows the total hours watched for the top four tournaments in 2018 compared to the total hours watched for the same tournaments in 2022. With the exception of *Dota 2* all tournament hours recorded an increase of more than 70% over a period of five years.

|  |
| --- |
| Diagram  Description automatically generated  *Source: Filotrani, 2022 (stats: escharts.com)* |

Fig.3.2. Total hours watched on Twitch 2018/2022

***Fig.3.2****. This table shows the total number of hours watched for the top four esports tournaments in 2018*

There is however some caution to be applied to the data in this chart. Unlike traditional sports on television there is to date no centrally agreed metric or organisation responsible for measuring viewership for esports globally. This is a huge concern for industry as it seeks to secure the long-term future of the sector through audience measurements such as attraction and retention, something marketeers need to justify investment. Much of the available market analysis relies on accessibility to raw data released by the sector, which is often not available. Instead analysists are forced to use interpretative data based on a mixture of undisclosed bespoke algorithms and human monitoring, both of which can be flawed. Furthermore, viewer numbers published for live events can easily be boosted by viewerbots (Swindlehurst, 2019). There is therefore a need for caution for when using the data released by game publishers and esports tournament organisers.

The fragmentation of audiences is proving a key challenge for measuring viewers for the television industry as well as esports despite a more established system for gathering data, as has already been noted. Audience fragmentation has been identified as a barrier to sector growth by industry experts such as by Duran (2020). Rigorous scientific research around esports audience metrics is lacking and is a gap that this study has identified and addressed, providing an important contribution to knowledge within this emerging field of scholarship.

As well as being a competitor to broadcast media, Twitter has been well studied as a news source for researchers from comparisons with the use of Facebook (von Nordheim, Boczek and Koppers, 2018) to the use of Tweets by news organisations (Armstrong and Fangfang Gao, 2010) to how sports journalists use Twitter to break news stories and promote on other platforms (Schultz and Sheffer, 2010). But the news source used by esports journalists, Reddit, although launched in 2005, a year before Twitter, the social news aggregator has interestingly attracted little to no scholarly research. What makes Reddit, and the collection of subreddits (the name given to the thousands of discrete topic areas) so interesting is the involvement of the community. As content can be voted up or down (the more votes making the content more visible) the dissemination of esports news is a democratic process. The policing of posts by the community also indicates a level of co-production or co-mediation.

**3.4. Co-creation and co-mediation**

An area that makes esports distinct is the relationship with its community. Hamari and Sjöblom (2017) identify the importance of social interaction, the sense of community and belonging, the ease of communication between players and spectators, and the deep connection to online chat as the distinguishing factors of the esports community. As already noted, the discourse around whether esports is sports has been a dominant line of enquiry within academia to date. The majority of the research has been focussed on the similarities and differences between sports fans and esports ‘fans’. There have been one or two comparative research studies on viewing modes, for example audiences who are more inclined to watch rather than participate in the games themselves (Kaytoue et al. 2012) and also research on fans who enjoy watching esports for reasons similar to those of traditional sports (Cheung and Huang, 2011). Brown’s 2017 study on fandom in esports and traditional sport concluded that “esports fans seek out esports content in a manner that complements without mirroring traditional sport fandom” (Brown et al, 2017, p. 14). Others have drawn similar conclusions; Southern (2017) argues the esports spectator fits the same model as the sports spectator, basing his argument, as do Billings and Ruilhley (2013) on Raney’s Categories of Motivation (Raney, 2006) displayed by traditional sports fans.

Raney identifies four key reasons why people spectate sport. He applies Uses and Gratifications Theory (Blumler and Katz, 1974) to assist his analysis and lists: 1. for entertainment, 2. for eustress, 3. for self-esteem and 4. for escape (Raney, 2006). Southern takes Raney’s categories and uses them as a lens to compare how esports and sports organisations reach their audiences. He concludes esports and traditional sport follow a similar model with the main difference being the platforms of distribution, namely television for traditional sport and Twitch and YouTube for esports. Southern argues esports have taken mediation techniques of television and adapted these to fit live streaming. What is missing from his research is the reverse consideration: how traditional sport is adapting to live streaming through esports and what role legacy media have in the broadcasts of esports tournaments. This is investigated here in the study of the UK ‘ePremier League’. While Southern’s conclusions are that esports and traditional sports audience models attract fans in almost the same way, his research does not include player-spectators who are so key to esports. Brown concludes “esports fans seek out esports content in a manner that complements without mirroring traditional sport fandom” (Brown et al. 2017, p. 14). This work, however, similarly misses the impact of participation on engagement that esports audiences afford.

Aligning the esports community with traditional sporting fans is misleading. Misleading because there is a central difference between sports and esports that both Southern and Brown don’t acknowledge in their work: the role the community has in the development of the games. Unlike traditional sports with its fixed rules and game play, esports games are not static – they have an evolution which can be directly tied to player feedback. Furthermore, although there may be similarities in the motivations for watching esports and traditional sports, the power and influence of the esports community is a fundamental component determining whether a game succeeds or fails. Community engagement and participation of an esports title or tournament are crucial for the growth and sustainability of esports (Brown 2017; Cheung and Huang, 2011). It follows therefore that potential lines of enquiry and explorations of “communicative practices” are missed “when live esports spectators are constituted according to the logics of conventional professional sporting events” (Taylor, 2016, p. 297).

This is because the esports community takes on multiple roles; it can “concurrently play, watch and participate in institutional governance” (Seo and Jung, 2016, p. 637). Esports games, unlike traditional sport, are continually evolving. That evolution is in part down to the community and in particular to the ‘modders’. The modders are the section of the gaming community responsible for taking an existing title and modifying it. For example by adding extra functionality, changing the aesthetics, and releasing the title as a total conversion or simply as the same game but with add-ons (Ungar, 2012). Modding is integral to the esports ecosystem and keeps the content ‘live’. The practice for games to be released with modding tools in-built, allowing a title to be completely transformed by the community, is a conundrum the esports industry faces. Do software companies release their games with ‘mod’ tools encouraging the community to modify and release potentially better versions of their game as with *ARMA 2* which morphed into *Battle Royale*, or do they keep control over the title by locking down their games and enforcing strict rules over copyright, as with EA Sports’ *FIFA* Series? Ensuring ownership over intellectual property rights in such a fluid content landscape is highly problematic. A business journalist for *The* *Esports Observer* notes: “the most successful titles are products of gaming communities—in that their player base grew organically, but most crucially, they were made by members of the community” (Ashton, 2019). The game publishers therefore ignore the community at their peril. In conclusion, to identify the esports community as the same as sport fandom is arguably to fundamentally misunderstand the differences between a traditional sports fan and an esports community member.

**3.5. Spectatorship: online versus in-person engagement**

The distinction between spectators, viewers and fans, is not made sufficiently clear in the current body of knowledge relating to esports audiences. This is particularly the case in the distinction between those people who attend events in-person versus those who watch online, the viewers. As already noted in Chapter 2, there is an urgent need for precision as these terms are often used interchangeably, as illustrated by Hamari and Sjöblom (2017), who are perhaps the most widely referenced researchers in the area of spectator motivation. For them the term spectator does not refer to someone attending an event, instead it refers to someone watching online.

There is little research concentrating on the Spectator: individuals who attend live events in-person. This is surprising given the high growth of esports ‘mega’ events. Stadiums internationally (pre-Covid) were regularly packed to capacity with esports fans. One of the longest running esports mega events for example, the Intel Extreme Masters Championship, held in Katowice, Poland, saw 173,000 fans attend over the course of the three days in its inaugural year, 2017. In 2018 this championship was the largest esports event in Poland. (Wosinska, 2019). Bespoke gaming venues such as Gfinity Australia, in Sydney with the capacity to seat 53,000 and China’s Zhongxian stadium along the banks of the Yangtze River, with a capacity of 21,000, demonstrate the popularity of esports in-person spectator events. These numbers are comparable to Premier League stadiums in the UK: Manchester City, the club at the top of the Premier League (2021/22 season), has a capacity of 55,097 in its Etihad Stadium. Everton, the club at the bottom of the League (2021/22 season) has a capacity of 39,571 within its Goodison Park stadium. Hybrid stadiums where both esports and traditional sporting events are now beginning to be considered in plans for new buildings and this is likely to herald interesting developments in broadcast sports media. The new London-based stadium for ‘Premier League’ Club Tottenham Hotspur and Fulham’s Craven Cottage Stadium have built capacity to host and broadcast *FIFA* *Series* games alongside their usual ‘Premier League’ games (Stoilov, 2018). The consequence of these new hybrid venues it that they could facilitate the convergence of the esports community with sports fans and afford an opportunity to see the confluence between the console game of *FIFA* and the physical game of football.

These dual-function stadiums potentially indicate a commodification of esports spectatorship, an area of growing interest to new researchers who are beginning to study esports. In the neighbouring field of Sport Management Studies business opportunities offered by the draw of esports live events has been explored by Jenny et al. (2018). They conclude “facility managers (of existing sport venues) should adapt to the changing environment through investigating the local esports market, or risk missing out on an excellent avenue for growth potential” (Jenny et al., 2018, p. 45). The case study of Katowice, Poland, and the ‘Intel Extreme Masters Championship[[8]](#footnote-9)’ is an example of the impact of adapting an existing events space to embrace esports can have on the prosperity of a town. Katowice (Gaudiosi, 2017), previously a town associated with coal mining and heavy industry is now seen as by many in the sector internationally as the home of the biggest esports event in the world.

The growth of esports mega events has turned the gaming community into a live audience and esports games into a spectacle, both of which add to the comparisons drawn between esports and traditional sports. What is interesting with the developments of bespoke and hybrid venues for esports mega events and building on the concept of the commodification of esports spectatorship, is this transformation of the gaming community to being a live audience and its implications. From the model of audience-as-observer of an event to the model of audience-as-participant in an event, the esports audience is an integral element to the very fabric of the spectacle. Though scholars such as Nick Taylor have been quick to conclude that the in-person spectator is of value only in their role in capturing the viewer online. In his book *Now You’re Playing with Audience Power: The Work of Watching Games*, Taylor notes that spectatorship – those attending in-person events – “become a crucial site of experimentation for an esports industry eager to sell the excitement of live competitive gaming events to a mass audience of online spectators” (Taylor, N., 2016, p. 296). In his ethnographic study of a ‘Major League Gaming’ (MLG) event Taylor (N., 2016) underlines the role of live events as gateways to capturing online audiences, noting: “the audience role is to contribute to the televisual spectacle for (MLG) live streaming audience”. He concludes his study with the observation that “the work of the live audience was channelled towards the production of compelling esports broadcasts by populating the online spectators screens with cheering fans at key moments” (Taylor, N., 2016, p. 301).

This focus on the online audience at the expense of the in-person spectator is something I experienced at a *CS:GO* tournament at Wembly Arena in 2019, in London. The manipulation of the audience seating so that there were no empty seats showing in the broadcast witnessed by the audience online was of high significance. Other scholars have made similar observations (Szablewicz, 2016; Cumming, 2020). This together with a discrepancy between the hyperbolic words of the host describing the event to the online audience as being the ‘biggest ever’ against the reality of the half empty arena strongly suggests the need for an editorial policy which addresses the ethics of broadcasting live esports events. But it isn’t just in clever camera choice which suggests the online audience of the live esports event is the focus. The post-production editing picks out the highlights for the online audience ensuring no key points are missed in a game. Comparisons can be drawn between esports events and broadcast sport on legacy television; scholars such as Whannel have suggested television versions of sporting events are “in some ways superior to the experience of live spectatorship” (Whannel, 2006, p. 206), the same could be argued for esports. Nevertheless the in-person spectators and esports events on the scale of Katowice are an integral part of the esports experience.

While research in esports has grown over the past decade much of the early work has been conducted through the lens of sport. What is becoming clear through more recent studies is that esports and sports are different and therefore need to be seen as distinct from each other during analysis. The hybrid nature of esports, the growing in-person spectatorship alongside the increasing online presence, the audience as co-creators and co-mediators, the dominance in new media spaces and platforms, the shift in dynamic between producer and consumer, all make esports potentially a separate area of study from sports.

**3.6. Theoretical framework: Diffusion of innovation**

This study has tracked the expansion of esports online over the past 20 years, while simultaneously noting the decline in traditional sports viewership on linear television in the UK. As a result, both content providers seem to be turning to each other for guidance on securing future sustainability. Esports publishers look to learn from sports broadcasters due to their emerging status, and traditional sports providers seek to understand the shifting viewing habits of audience members who no longer demonstrate loyalty to a specific television channel. Furthermore, as illustrated by the blending of real and virtual elements in games like *FIFA*, the exchange of knowledge between traditional and emerging forms of cultural production could be advantageous for both sides. Traditional broadcasters can learn from new esports media about engaging live streaming audiences, while new esports broadcasters might benefit from exploring established practices within legacy sports media to address their own concerns. While Chaloner (2020) concludes esports no longer needs television to validate its position as a credible industry, the question about the sector’s sustainability over the long term remains unanswered.

To become an established part of the UK digital economy the assumption has been made that the British esports sector will need widespread adoption by the general public. In order to explore what factors are needed for this to happen, current adoption research is useful, specifically, Diffusion of Innovation Theory first developed by Everett Rogers in 1962. The theory explains how new ideas, technologies, products, and services are spread and adopted within a population and identifies several factors that influence the rate of adoption of an innovation, including the perceived relative advantage of the innovation, its compatibility with existing values and practices, the complexity of the innovation, the ability to try the innovation before adopting it, and the extent of social influence and communication about the innovation. Diffusion is defined as “the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system” (Rogers, 2003, p. 11). The theory has been used widely since across a variety of disciplines, including marketing, sociology, communication, and technology and has been used recently to examine conditions for adoption of esports as curricula within higher education (Seth, Gawrysiak and Besombes, 2021).

The theory suggests that the adoption of an innovation occurs in a predictable pattern over time, with five main groups of adopters: (1) innovators, (2) early adopters, (3) early majority, (4) late majority, (5) laggards. Using this lens it can be seen that esports has passed through stage one, stage two, and is at the early majority stage. This is demonstrated by the interest shown in the sector by non-endemic brands wanting to invest in esports (Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2022) and external organisations acquiring teams and publishers (Deloitte, 2022) most notably the ongoing negotiations for Xbox owned by Microsoft to acquire Activision Blizzard, the game publisher responsible for some of the top esports titles including *League of Legends*. For an innovation to move into the final two stages where there is mass acceptance and take up Rogers identifies a number of key elements which need to be met. Two elements have pertinence for esports and this study. Firstly the compiling and use of success stories: this is where the role of the mainstream media is going to be crucial (Filotrani, 2020). Secondly the provision of evidence of the ‘innovation’s’ (esports) effectiveness will be needed: this is why credible statistics of the sector are fundamental. Studies in other sectors have demonstrated the importance of media coverage in the diffusion of innovations, and how media can play a critical role in influencing public opinion and promoting the adoption of new practices (McDaniel et al., 2014) but the impact of mainstream media on the adoption of esports has not yet been considered.

Roger’s analysis of the innovation process within organisations is useful here in order to look more critically at what is going on in mainstream media in relation to esports. If we substitute the word ‘organisation’ for ‘sport media’, we can usefully apply his model. Rogers divides the innovation process up into two separate stages: “’initiation’, consisting of all of the information gathering, conceptualization, and planning for the adoption, leading up to the decision to adopt, and, ‘implementation’, consisting of all of the events, actions, and decisions involved in putting the innovation to use” (Rogers, 2003, p. 421).

Five steps are identified in order to assist an organisation to go from initiation to implementation. These are:

Step 1. ‘Agenda-setting’: the problems facing the organisation (sport media) are identified and there is consensus that a solution needs to be found. In this case the problem is the declining audiences on television which is leading to declining revenue, and the solution to be found, is a way to recapture the audience.

Step 2. ‘Matching’: the problem is matched to a solution, in this case the recognition that there is a rise in esports audiences on streaming platforms, where new (and existing) audiences are to be found.

Step 3. ‘Redefining/restructuring’: the innovation (esports/live streaming) is modified and re-invented to fit the organisation (experimentation with covering esports events by mainstream broadcasters).

Step 4. ‘Clarifying’: the relationship between the organisation (sport media) and the innovation (esports/live streaming) is defined more clearly, through lessons learnt during the test coverage for example – the success or failure of the coverage of the ‘‘ePremier League’’ Finals, the subject of this enquiry.

Step 5. ‘Routinising’: the innovation becomes an accepted part of the organisation. In this case where esports becomes an accepted genre in mainstream journalism/media, reflected in how content is handled on news media platforms.

Roger’s five steps have provided a highly useful theoretical framework to use in order to understand the relationship of mainstream media in the UK to esports and also to frame discussion of what role esports plays when considering the sustainability of the overall sports sector.

**3.7. Defining the research question**

The review of current literature revealed several gaps in knowledge with regards to esports journalism and mainstream media’s coverage of the sector in the UK and it also pointed to the synergies between sports and esports. In the contemporary media landscape where we are seeing an increasing esports audience while at the same time both literature and industry reports are revealing a compromised television audience, particularly with reference to sports, the question is: What factors contribute to the limited coverage of esports by mainstream media in the UK?

Building on the review of both academic literature and industry reports, this study drew upon a series of interviews with industry experts strategically chosen as representatives of key areas of inquiry, namely; esports journalism, live tournaments, esports broadcasting and sport. The four experts interviewed were: (1) Rob Black, the former chief operating officer forESL UK. Black’s experience in operating branded international leagues and hosting mega events gave insight into the esports live events sector. Founded in 2000, ESL (formerly known as the Electronic Sports League) is one of the largest esports events companies in the world. Black currently runs a consultancy company called esports promod which offers strategy advice to esports clients on everything from event organisation to broadcasting. (2) Brandon Smith, is the main caster[[9]](#footnote-10) on all official esports *FIFA* tournaments globally. Smith was able to give key insights into esports broadcasting. Significantly, Smith, alongside Richard Buckley, has been the caster for all ‘‘ePremier League’ Finals’ to date. (3) Trevor Kane who was the head of business development for *Sportego*, a sports analytics company specialising in football clubs, fans and sponsors, particularly in relation to *Fantasy Football*. Keane’s involvement with fantasy football leagues meant he was able to provide insight into relationships between sports and esports, with a particular focus on football clubs in the UK. As co-founder Keane currently leads Epic Global, an esports and gaming consultancy. (4) Jack Stewart, a freelance esports journalist who currently works across a number of mainstream and endemic publications. He is a significant person in the discussion about mainstream media’s involvement with esports as he was the first esports journalist to be employed by a mainstream newspaper (the *Daily Mail*) in the UK in 2018. He was therefore ideally placed to be able to speak about how esports was being received by mainstream media.

Coming to this research as a ‘non-esports expert’, these industry interviews were a vital source, providing not only sector expertise but a continual reference point for reflection throughout the period of research, giving confidence in the pursuit of the objectives of the study, namely to understand why esports was not being covered by mainstream media in the UK given the size of the esports audience for esports tournaments both online and in person. Key points of discussion from the interviews included:

* esports is not being covered by mainstream media in any significant way in the UK
* game publishers tightly control the flow of information within the sector
* the industry lacks rigorous, investigative journalism
* the industry lacks a trusted metrics system for capturing audience data

These interviews gave allowance to gage current thoughts about the esports sector from an industry perspective, to discuss selected academic literature published to date and to test out initial hypotheses. The key points of discussion from the interviews, together with the literature and the industry reports, led to the formation of the central question concerning this research.

By exploring both the current landscape of esports journalism and the coverage of esports on mainstream media in the UK, some answers to how the sector is both perceived and treated by mainstream media will be revealed, and some indication given of the factors that make esports more or less viable as a new genre of content for mainstream media to cover.

**Chapter 4:**

Decoding Esports in the UK Mainstream Media: Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology developed to address the research question of why UK mainstream media is not covering esports. The results of this study have significant implications for various stakeholders, including publishers, policy makers, and analysts. For instance, the findings related to journalists' contemporary working practices will be of interest to the National Union of Journalists and the British Association of Journalists. Educators, such as the National Training Council of Journalists, will be interested in the importance of professional training for journalists. Similarly, both mainstream broadcasters and esports media, particularly SKY Sports and Gfinity, will be interested in the findings related to live streaming and broadcasting live esports events.

Game publishers, particularly EA Sports, will be interested in the findings concerning the design of esports titles and tournaments, while the ‘Premier League’ and *FIFA* globally will be interested in the findings related to the relationship between sports, particularly football, and esports teams and organisations. Furthermore, the perceptions of mainstream media from the esports sector will be of interest to newspapers and broadcasters, particularly the BBC. The study's results will also be relevant to various research centres, such as the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, endemic esports media publishers such as ESI, industry groups such as UKie, policy makers and regulators such as Ofcom, the International Olympics Committee, market and data analysts such as Newzoo, Deloitte, and Nielsen.

The chapter begins by establishing the rationale for *FIFA Series* and the ‘ePremier League’ as the title and tournament selected to answer the research question. The chapter then addresses why a mixed-method approach was the most appropriate and which mixed-methods were utilised is described in detail. How the data sets were gathered, and lessons learned through the process are also outlined. The chapter ends with an evaluation of the advantages and limitations of the methodology.

**4.2. Rationale for the selection of *FIFA* *Series* and the ‘ePremier League’**

The title selected as the focus for answering the research question is the simulated sports game, *FIFA Series* published by one of the most influential game publishers in the space, EA Sports. The genre of simulated sports was chosen against another genre of esports, such as multiplayer online battle arena games (MOBA) following the rationale that a simulated sports game such as football, in comparison to a strategy fantasy game such as MOBA title *League of Legends*, is widely understood by the general public and requires no explanation of the rules of the game, nor specialist knowledge. This makes the esports title more easily accessible to a mainstream audience, and therefore a more likely genre of content to be covered by mainstream media.

Football was selected over and above any other sport represented by a simulated sports title such as basketball (*NBA2K*), or baseball (*MLB: The Show*), because the sport has established world championships, leagues and professional players in both the ‘real’ game and its digital equivalents, as already noted, and importantly football has attracted some of the biggest traditional sports audiences on television. In 2007 for example, according to Ofcom, 85% of the broadcast revenue generated by the top 10 sports events in the UK can be attributed to football, with the English Premier League being responsible for 52% of the overall total (Ofcom, 2007).

Another reason for choosing football over another sport is the number of football clubs which are now sponsoring professional esports players to represent them in many esports leagues – not just SIM games. For example, “Arsenal shareholder Stan Kroenke co-owns the ‘*Overwatch* League’ franchise, Los Angeles Gladiators, Swansea City co-owner Steve Kaplan is a minority owner of Immortals, and Crystal Palace’s owners Joshua Harris and David Blitzer acquired Team Dignitas in 2016” (Fitch, 2018). Many of the Premier League Clubs in the UK have stakes in esports, including Manchester City and West Ham United as well as clubs across Europe; VFL Wolfsburg, PSV Eindhoven and Sporting Lisbon amongst others. One of the biggest esports teams in operation currently Fnatic has partnered with AS Roma and David Beckham’s investment in Guild Esports in 2020 makes him a co-owner.

Following this rationale, the esports title chosen was EA Sports’ football game, *FIFA Series*. This simulated football game was selected over another competitor esports football title such as *Pro Evolution Soccer* (PES) which is now known as *eFootball* by Konami, for a number of reasons. Firstly, as already noted, the game publisher EA Sports has occupied the space of simulated sports for a substantial period of time, giving the publisher market dominance, specifically in Europe and North America. Indeed, the publisher has been producing sports video games since 1991. The publisher launched its first issue of the *FIFA Series* in 1993 (called *FIFA* *International Soccer*).

Secondly, *FIFA* *Series* was chosen because it was the game used in the ‘ePremier League’, the league positioned as a gateway to esports for mainstream audiences, and thirdly, *FIFA* *Series* was selected because it has been officially endorsed with a licence by the International Federation of Association Football (*FIFA*) since its launch in 1993. This has significant impact in not only the game’s ecosystem but also in the aesthetics, the branding and in its profile with professional football clubs all across the world, though it must be noted, that this licensing agreement between EA Sports and *FIFA* comes to an end in 2023. The implications of this are that EA Sports will no longer have the ability to use *FIFA*’s intellectual property in their games. The last release of the game is *FIFA* 23 after which the series will rebrand as EA SPORTS™ *FIFA* (EA Sports, 2022).

What impact this is to have in the market of simulated football games remains to be seen but EA Sports also has a licence with the ‘European Champions League’ (UEFA) and several licensing agreements with national football leagues such as the ‘English Premier League’, ‘Bundesliga’ in Germany and Spain’s ‘La Ligua’ (European Club Association, 2021). Finally, EA Sports has a licence agreement with FIFPro, the worldwide union for professional footballers (currently representing more than 50,000 footballers). For all of these reasons, *FIFA* *Series* is the highest profile esports football title in the world, with tangible links to the sport of football, and football clubs. This mirroring of real football clubs and leagues with a digital equivalent, the argument follows, makes the game of *FIFA* an ideal vehicle for examining mainstream media coverage of esports.

**T**he ‘ePremier League’, was selected as the specific tournament because it is the creation of the ‘English Premier League’, formerly known as the ‘Football League’ (FA). Established in 1888, the 'FA' is the world's oldest network of interconnected football leagues (Butler and Massey, 2018). With the creation of the ‘ePremier League’ (ePl), the ‘English Premier League’ is responsible for the world’s first esports tournament to converge a ‘real’ and ‘digital’ version of the same football league. Additionally, as the launch of the ‘ePl’ in late 2018, coincided with the commencement of this study, the League provided an opportunity to examine an esports tournament from inception through its inaugural season, to seasons 2 and 3. Importantly, with the Finals of each season being streamed live on YouTube and Twitch and SKY Sports being named as the main media partner, the ‘ePremier League’ and *FIFA* *Series* yielded opportunities to explore the relationships between new media content producers and broadcasters and legacy newspapers and broadcasters, for examining how legacy media is approaching new ways of distributing and producing content – via live streaming – and how it is handling new content formats – esports tournaments.

**4.3. The methodological approach**

What has been determined from the literature is that as a sector, a participant activity and a spectator activity, esports permeates many social spaces. The practice of esports encompasses both the ‘virtual’ and the ‘real’, in that it can be both spectated in-person at live events and played and viewed online and it is found across a number of different platforms and devices. This includes online platforms such as Twitch and YouTube, communication platforms such as Discord, on mediums such as television and smart phones, and on gaming consoles such as the Xbox and Playstation. It has also been determined that the term esports encapsulates a broad range of disciplines, one of the most dominant being sport, and that there has been a rise in the esports audience together with a decline in television viewers, with particular reference to live sports.

Given the complexity that esports as a sector presents, for all the aforementioned reasons, a mixed-method approach was chosen with the aim of gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the research question than a purely qualitative or quantitative driven design would yield. To give a succinct explanation of the method it is useful to reflect on a definition by one of the most influential scholars in this area, John Creswell:

A methodology and method to research in the social, behavioral, and health sciences in which the investigator gathers both quantitative (close-ended) and qualitative (open-ended) data, integrates or combines the two and then draws inferences (called “metainferences”) from the integration that provides insight beyond what can be learned from the quantitative or qualitative data (Creswell, 2022, p.2)

This approach to research can be traced back to the 1950s and 1960s when researchers started to discuss the integration of qualitative and quantitative methods. However, it was in the 1980s and 1990s that mixed-methods research gained more prominence and recognition, partly due to the work of scholars like John W. Creswell. In the 1990s and early 2000s, researchers began using mixed methods in gaming research, taking the space between qualitative and quantitative research, blending these traditionally distinct approaches to data gathering (Ruddock, 2017). These studies often combined surveys or interviews with data from game logs or online communities (Consalvo and Dutton, 2006; Yee, 2006; Shaw, 2011). Andreas Lieberoth and Andreas Roepstorff's chapter ‘Mixed methods in game research: Playing on strengths and countering weaknesses*’* in *Game Research (2015)* provides a useful discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of mixed methods research in the context of game research, concluding that mixed methods research offers several advantages, such as the ability to collect a wider range of data, triangulate findings, and provide a more nuanced understanding of the research topic. By combining qualitative and quantitative methods, researchers can better address complex research questions and capture the subjective experiences of players, as well as the objective data of gameplay.

The advantage of this methodology also presents one of its main challenges; how to integrate qualitative and quantitative data that can have different epistemological and ontological assumptions that include: positivism and realism (ontological) and constructivism and social constructivism (epistemological). To transcend this traditional divide between qualitative and quantitative approaches many mixed-methods studies adopt pragmatism as the guiding philosophical foundation. This focus on pragmatism emphasizes the importance of selecting the most appropriate combination of research aims, questions, and methods to ensure optimal results and insights. (Feilzer, 2010). This is the approach taken for this study.

Seven research aims were formulated to answer the research question: What factors contribute to the limited coverage of esports by mainstream media in the UK? and a pragmatic approach taken regarding procedures. Fig 4.1 sets out the procedures used to gather data for these research aims and shows the procedure product: quantitative or qualitative data. The seven research aims are: (1) To gage the landscape of esports journalism in the UK, (2) To gage perception of esports by mainstream media, (3) To establish knowledge of the term ‘esports’ by mainstream media, (4) To establish how esports content is categorised by mainstream media (5) To quantify how much esports content is covered by mainstream media (6) To quantify the size of viewership of a live esports event, (7) To analyse a broadcast of a live esports event

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Fig.4.1. Research aims and procedures

Fig.4.2. shows a timeline for the data collection period. Qualitative data was gathered through interviews with esports journalists conducted over a period of 3 years, from 2019 to 2021. Qualitative data was also gathered through the content analysis of media coverage of an esports event in 2019 and in 2021, and through the content analysis of the live broadcast of an esports event in 2019 and in 2021. Quantitative data was gathered through two surveys, sent out to mainstream journalists in the UK in 2019 and in 2020. Quantitative data was also gathered in the monitoring of viewers watching a live esports tournament in 2019 and in 2021. Gathering both quantitative and qualitative data allowed for cross-referencing, each data set substantiating the other. In other words, the interpretation of the quantitative data was supported by the ability to contextualise through qualitative data and vice versa. The figure below shows the timeline of the data collection.

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Fig.4.2. Timeline of data collection

The interviews in green are the exploratory industry interviews conducted during the first phase of the project, the blue are the interviews with the esports journalists conducted in the second phase. The data collection started and ended with the content analysis of the live ‘ePremier League’ Finals in March 2019 and in March 2021.

The figure below (4.3.) shows the design of the research project. The project was conducted over four phases. (1) An exploratory phase where the literature, industry reports and expert interviews were used to identify the research question and narrow the focus of the study, (2) a data collection phase, where the interviews, surveys and content analysis was conducted, (3) an individual data set analysis phase, (4) followed by the final phase where the key findings were interrogated as an integrated set. Phase four was complex because of the amount of data generated and because of the inherent difficulties of comparing qualitative with quantitative as has already been discussed. To assist with this level of complexity a thematic approach was adopted using the 4Ps of Tidd and Bessant’s Innovation of Space model (2021) which is discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Literature/industry reports  *\*The innovation space model: 4Ps*  Qualitative   * Interviews * Content Analysis   *Thematic interrogation of integrated findings*  *Findings integration*  Individual data set analysis  Quantitative   * Surveys * Content Analysis   \*Tidd and Bessant, 2021  Expert industry interviews   |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | *Phase: 1* | *Phase: 2* | *Phase: 3* | *Phase: 4* |   *Source: Filotrani, 2023* |

Fig.4.3. Model of research design

Throughout the period a Research Diary was used to record thoughts and observations. The diary was particularly useful during the exploratory stages of the research, allowing for reflection on live events, meetings, online videos of events and conversations with people from industry informally both at events and through calls about the research as they happened. The merits of which Newbury (2001) discusses in *Diaries and Fieldnotes in the Research Process.* The diary evolved into three distinct areas: Passing Thoughts; Reflections on Reading Material; Observations of/at Events (of or at because some of the events were attended in person and some watched online and on television). This process of organising the diary followed the systematic approach taken by sociologists Schatzman and Strauss (1973). Their diaries were organised into: Observational Notes; Theoretical Notes; Methodological Notes. Having a systematic approach such as this made the research content more accessible and therefore more useful as a reference document. The observations recorded during attendance at in-person esports events were used in comparison to the experiences of watching the esports tournaments online. I found as a novice to both esports and academic research, keeping a record of both factual information and reflective content in this way helped with critical thinking and self-reflection.

The project was guided by the UK Research Integrity Office (UKRIO) *Code of Practice for Research* (2009), and the London South Bank University *Ethics Code of Practice for Human Participants* (London South Bank University, 2020) and approved by the Arts and Creative Industries Ethics Committee. All the participants interviewed were given participation information sheets with a consent form (see Appendix A). They all gave consent for their full names to be in the public domain (see Appendix B for the full list of interviewees).

Prior to moving on to delineating the procedures employed in this study, I think it is worth reflecting upon the influence of my background as a journalist on the decision to adopt a mixed-methods approach. Although navigating the epistemological and ontological dimensions within a single project presents an intellectual challenge, journalism frequently necessitates the integration of empirical, data-driven evidence alongside personal reflections, observations, and experiences. In fact, substantiating a news article often requires the incorporation of independent statistical evidence, corroborated by eyewitness accounts and expert opinions. This inherent triangulation of facts, eyewitness testimonies, and expert perspectives in every story serves to either support or refute a particular editorial stance. Consequently, my method for addressing the research question naturally aligned with my journalistic approach, which entails seeking both types of data as evidence and embracing a mixed-methods strategy.

* 1. **The semi-structured interviews: esports journalists**

To gage the role mainstream media plays within the sector from the perspective of esports journalists and to explore the current landscape of esports journalism in the UK, a sample of esports journalists were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews around the topic of esports journalism in the UK. Topics covered in the interviews included their current roles, their previous work experience and training and their professional relationship with mainstream media in the UK.

Twenty esports journalists were invited via email and direct messaging to take part, from which eight agreed to participate. The emails and direct messages inviting the participants to the interviews were sent to journalists identified through a number of sources. Firstly, they were identified through my own professional contacts made across my career as a journalist for national newspapers, secondly through contacts made through my career as a journalist educator within higher education, thirdly through my professional network on Linkedin and fourthly, through contacts made as vice chair and founding member of the Association for Continuing Education in esports (ACES)[[10]](#footnote-11). As well as using direct contacts I used a snowball subject recruitment technique, also known as snowball sampling recruitment. This is a non-random technique similar to convenience sampling, a technique which Tenzek (2018) explains particularly lends itself to research that is exploratory in nature. This is “because snowball sampling allows participants to reach out and find more research subjects, researchers have access to potentially unique, hard-to-reach or marginalized populations” (Tenzek, 2018, p. 1614). As a relatively new professional sector, esports journalists are both marginalized and hard-to-reach.

Following this technique, recommendations were sought from the interviewees for other suitable candidates. The aim in creating a sample for the interviews was to have at least one representative from each of the major publishers currently of esports content for a UK audience. Using a combination of reach (online traffic), revenue, and claims of the publication, the main publishers of esports content for the UK were identified as: The *esports Observer*, *Esports Insider*, *Esports News UK*, *Dot esports*, *Dexerto*. The table below shows the size of each company in terms of audience reach and in terms of revenue by way of context. Due to some of these sites being global, reporters covering UK esports news predominantly rather than global news were targeted.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Publisher | Date founded | \*Reach  (monthly uniques) | Claim | \*Revenue (2020) | Headquarters |
| *The esports Observer*[[11]](#footnote-12) | 2015 | 116k | The world’s leading source for esports business news and insights | $2.03m | Berlin, Germany |
| *Esports Insider* | 2016 | 188k | The leading esports b2b events and media company | $5.08m | London, UK |
| *Esports News UK* | 2015 | 195k | The main source of UK esports news | Not known | Surrey, UK |
| *Dot Esports* | 2013 | 13m | The premier global destination for coverage of esports. Dot Esports is part of the GAMURS’[[12]](#footnote-13) network of websites | $7.25m | Sydney, Australia |
| *Dexerto* | 2015 | 20m | The world’s largest esports and gaming news hub | $14.5m | London, UK |

*\*reviewbolt.com numbers correct as of Nov, 2021*

Fig.4.4. Endemic esports publishers

All of these publications with the exception of *Dot esports* were represented. The eight esports’ journalists who agreed to participate are: Adam Fitch (*Esports Insider*), Calum Patterson (*Dexerto*), Chris Trout (*Gfinity*), Dom Sacco (*Esports News UK*), Graham Ashton (*The Esports Observer*), Mike Stubbs (freelance), Trent Murray (*The Esports Observer*) and Nathan Bliss (*Daily Mirror* - the only esports journalist included that was employed by a mainstream newspaper). All eight agreed for their names to be used in full in the study. The limitations of this as the sample group are discussed at the end of the chapter.

Semi-structured rather than unstructured or structured was chosen as a method of interview, for a number of reasons. Semi-structured interviews provide the flexibility to adapt the interview based on the participant's responses, not possible in a strictly structured interview, while at the same time maintaining a level of consistency by using predetermined interview questions or topics. Having consistency across the participants allowed for a more systematic comparison of responses through coding using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), NVivo. In short, semi-structured interviews strike a balance between the control and consistency of structured interviews and the freedom and spontaneity of unstructured interviews.

To ensure parity of experience, each interviewee was treated in the same manner with the interviews all conducted via Zoom, recorded, exported as MP3 audio files and sent to a transcription company to transcribe, with time codes making the process for identifying key information during the coding process easier. The interviews were timed to start and finish within 30mins. A scripted introduction was read at the beginning of each interview explaining the process and a copy of the questions were sent via email to each participant 15 mins before the interview. This was to allow enough time for the interviewees to read through the questions but not enough for them to pre-plan and rehearse an answer. In retrospect it might have been better to send the interviewees the area of the question rather than the exact wording, which is a practice regularly employed by journalists. This perhaps would have allowed for a more spontaneous response. However, having kept the amount of possible pre-planning down to 15 mins the answers did not sound rehearsed. As these were semi-structured interviews, supplementary questions were only asked if an answer needed further explanation and where possible the interviewee was left to answer freely without interviewer prompts (verbal or non-verbal), directing the response. The questions sent to the interviewees are in the table below.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | | 1. *Can you describe your current role and give me an indication of how you got this job – your entry into journalism, any training, previous roles, anything that illustrates your career path to date?* 2. *How has the esports journalism sector developed over the past ten years? Who are the major players and how has the process of breaking esports news changed?* 3. *What relationship does the esports press have with mainstream media?* 4. *What are some of the barriers esports journalists face?* | 1. *The news agenda in mainstream media is very much driven by location – ie: the closer a news item to the proximity of the publication’s audience, the more likely it is to be covered. How does location impact an esports news agenda?* 2. *How important is journalism to the future sustainability of the esports sector?* 3. *Is there anything that you would like to add or something I haven’t covered that you would like to discuss?* | |

Fig.4.5. Questions for esports journalists

The questions were crafted to elicit responses to some of the points raised following the preliminary pilot interviews with industry experts. Key points from these interviews which contributed to the questions include: that there is a lack of investigative journalism within esports currently, the sector is not being covered by mainstream media in any significant way in the UK and that game publishers have an important role in controlling the flow of information. Questions were also crafted specifically to gain understanding about the qualifications and training and the constituent elements of day-to-day performance of the participants within their roles as esports journalists.

The process of conducting the semi-structured interviews was revealing not just for the information pertinent to the study but also in highlighting the techniques of an interviewer in managing the interview. As a former journalist the art of the interview is familiar territory for me. However, what was brought into focus was the difference in approach needed from interviewing as a journalist compared to interviewing as a researcher. Although both roles employ similar methodology in terms of research, I found the technique required for interviewing fundamentally different. As a journalist going into an interview, you know approximately (certainly for a news feature) what information is needed in order for you to complete an article. There is a formula for writing a news feature that dictates the direction of an interview. A journalist asks questions to find the information needed to fit the formula. This means establishment of the facts – the who, what, when of an event, a substantiation of these facts through eye-witness accounts, and then a why an event has occurred provided by an expert voice. A journalist therefore interviewing for a news story is looking specifically to meet these requirements. Gathering quotes and information to support or to refute the angle of the article, as determined by the focus of the publication, all the while under a time constraint to meet a deadline. The interview process is therefore highly managed and disciplined. It is not exploratory.

Conducting interviews as a researcher requires a different technique. I found, that although there are different subtypes of interviews (Jamshed, 2014), and the researcher has the opportunity to guide an interviewee towards a topic of interest, it is in a much more subtle way than the approach of a journalist. The biggest difference between the two techniques is that the end point is not known for the researcher. Rather the end point is revealed through the responses from the interviewee, with the researcher’s role to facilitate these responses, but not to guide. This was most surprising and required a repositioning of my intent. Furthermore, through this process it became clear, that in order for the interview to not reflect the bias of the researcher’s point of view, the information revealed by the subject needs to be as free from manipulation as possible. The more the answers are manipulated by the researcher the less objective and therefore of less value and the more open the research will be to criticisms of cherry picking or “gerrymandering” as Ruddock (2017, p. 188) describes it, to support a pre-selected argument.

For me, as a former newspaper journalist, working out what the role of a researcher rather than journalist is, was enlightening, not just for the research process but also for bringing into focus exactly what one does as a journalist, which is a thread that runs throughout this study. What do we mean by the term journalist? What is the function of a journalist? While a news journalist is disciplined not to allow their voice to be heard in a news piece, the understanding of just how much a journalist can manipulate an interview in order to support an angle was highlighted by this research process and what I found particularly difficult was the elimination of all the non-verbal communication that is second nature to a journalist during an interview – the nodding of the head in encouragement, the smiling, the frowning, all used to direct an interviewee through an interview. The impact of verbal and non-verbal cues in directing news interviews is an interesting consideration in assessing potential (conscious or unconscious) media manipulation in the reporting of stories.

Drawing upon previous examples of research within Journalism Studies that use thematic analysis to inform a coding process (O'Neill, D., and Harcup, T. 2009) before importing the interviews into qualitative research software NVivo, there was a process of familiarisation where I immersed myself in the material – reading all the interviews through and noting any immediate trends or patterns of thought signified by the repetition of key words. At this stage the transcribed interviews were imported into NVivo to be formally coded. Coding with NVivo can be done in two ways. Firstly, by applying a pre-constructed coding scheme to a data set or secondly by creating the coding scheme of key concepts from the data set. The initial method employed, for this study, fell somewhere in the middle of these two options. A singular interview was selected to use as the framework from which a coding structure was created. The remaining interviews were then coded against this framework. This, however, proved to be an unsatisfactory method because upon careful reading of the second interview following the coding established from the first, it became apparent that there were other points raised in the second interview that also suggested key words for coding, useful for the research. The initial method was therefore abandoned and replaced by the systematic analysis of all the interviews, question by question, for the coding structure. Answers for each question were compared, and any points of interest were noted down, areas of similarity and differences highlighted and lists created from any specific details such as named games, publishers, media organisations, and countries. This provided a starting point for organising the data into nodes. In NVivo “a Node represents a code, theme, or idea about the data in a project” (Wong, 2008, p. 20).

The top level formation of the coding frame can be seen in Fig.4.6. The table shows the questions with the key themes in the answers that were consistent across all eight interviews. These themes created the nodes into which the data was organised.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
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| |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | | QUESTIONS | NODES | | | Q1. Can you describe your current role and give me an indication of how you got this job – your entry into journalism, any training, previous roles, anything that illustrates your career path to date? | Current role | Journalism experience | | Publication focus | Previous roles | | Education |  | | Q2. How has the esports journalism sector developed over the past ten years? Who are the major players and how has the process of breaking esports news changed? | esports journalism | Major players | | Gaming journalism | Reddit | | Q3. What relationship does the esports press have with mainstream media? | BBC | Fox Business | | Daily Mail | Sports Journalism | | ESPN | The Guardian | | Q4. What are some of the barriers esports journalists face? | Attendance | Metrics | | Pay | Public opinion | | Q5. The news agenda in mainstream media is very much driven by location – ie: the closer a news item to the proximity of the publication’s audience, the more likely it is to be covered. How does location impact an esports news agenda? | America | Location | | Audience | Regional | | China | Twitter | | Discord | TV | | Europe | Online | | Language |  | | Q6. How important is journalism to the future sustainability of the esports sector? | Angles | Press | | Blog | Roles | | Content | Social Media | | Inhouse | Story | | Players | Teams | | Q7. Is there anything that you would like to add or something I haven’t covered that you would like to discuss? | British | Professional | | Korea | Streamer | | Marketing | Twitch | | PR | YouTube |   *Source: Filotrani, 2021* |

Fig.4.6. Coding frame NVivo

From this starting point it was possible to cluster the nodes around key terms – leaving the questions behind and using these key terms as the points for comparative analysis. The key terms identified are: ‘esports journalism’, ‘media’, ‘barriers’, ‘groups’, ‘locations’, ‘platforms’, ‘careers’, ‘events’ and ‘games’ as can be seen in the table below.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | KEY TERMS | CLUSTERS OF NODES | | | | | | | **Esports journalism** | Gaming journalism | Major players | Breaking news | Sports journalism | PR | | Press | In house | Professional | Freelance |  | | **Media** | BBC | Washington Post | esports Insider | esports News UK | esports Talk | | Daily Mail | ESPN | Red Bull | Dot esports | The Sun | | The Guardian | Fox Business | Dexerto | esports Observer | The Mirror | | **Barriers** | Pay | Access | Metrics | Language |  | | **Groups** | Audience | Fans | Streamers | Teams | Players | | **Locations** | Global | North America | China | Japan | Korea | | Regional | UK | Europe |  |  | | **Platforms** | Discord | Linkedin | MSN | Twitter | YouTube | | Online | TV | Twitch |  |  | | **Careers** | Current role | Education | Journalism experience | Previous roles | Publication focus | | **Events** | Attendance | Katowice | Organisers | Tickets |  | | **Games** | Call of Duty | Counter Strike | League of Legends | Fortnite | *FIFA* |   *Source: Filotrani, 2021* |

Fig.4.7. Clusters of nodes and key terms

These clusters of nodes and key terms provided a thematic framework allowing comparison across the three different data sets: semi-structured interviews, surveys and content analysis.

While NVivo proved useful in being able to demonstrate the threads of the discourse visually and in showing the topics that were most discussed through the concentration of words, depicted through word clouds (Fig.4.8.), there were limitations to using the tool for this project. Namely, it was difficult to learn as a novice and seemed an overly complicated process for the simplicity of output. The language NVivo employs to organise the data is confusing and the terms not clearly defined. It is not obvious what constitutes a node, a case and a set for example. The upload function for different data sets, is basic. While it is possible to upload spreadsheets, word documents, audio and video files, the analysis of each is manual. The software does not offer much more than a repository for all the data sets allowing for annotation. Instead of an AI function crawling the datasets to find patterns and trends for a researcher to consider, the system is limited to word searches and key phrases, which requiring inputting manually. While there is the function to search all data around a key phrase, the software does little more than collate the responses. There is no further analysis available, and therefore there is no sense of the software enhancing discovery. Instead, it is perfunctory.

The chart below shows the option to create word clouds; a way of quickly assessing key themes in a word document. This word cloud was created from 50 of the most common words across all of the interviews with the esports journalists.

|  |
| --- |
| Text  Description automatically generated |

Fig.4.8. NVivo’s word cloud function

The word cloud function doesn’t automatically detect words of interest, instead it counts every single word. To use this function therefore requires a considerable amount of manual filtering to be applied. Nevertheless, this word cloud does provide a succinct demonstration of the key focus for this study.

What the software does do is facilitate the process of coding, in providing a centralised place from which to subdivide raw data and categorise that data electronically instead of manually with coloured pens and cutting pieces of paper up. This is particularly useful for large quantities of data but, as Wong (2008) points out, “coding and data analysis are not synonymous” (Wong, 2008, p. 14). NVivo doesn’t do the analysis for the researcher. In many respects computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software of which NVivo is an example, should be used in conjunction with more traditional processes of coding; sticky notes, coloured pens, paper, display boards. As researchers Maher et al. (2018) conclude, the very process of calling up data on NVivo using a computer screen, rather than being able to see all the data physically on display boards, means the data offered for analysis has already been through an editing process dependent as it is on the researcher making “decisions based on memory rather than visually scanning the data” (Maher et al., 2018, p. 11). This makes the analysis of data limited to the “sequential and constrained visual format” (Maher et al., 2018, p. 12) of the software and the computer screen.

Nevertheless, the benefits of using the software for this study lay in forcing a systematic approach to organising the data and in allowing easy cross-referencing across all of the responses. Having used NVivo to work through the coding framework based on the clusters of nodes around key terms, it became apparent that the process would have been simpler if the questions had been less complex. This is because each question covered more than one point and therefore created more than one node. It would have been easier to streamline the questions at the beginning so the comparison between answers was already more structured before the coding process began. For example, the question: *Can you describe your current role and give me an indication of how you got this job – your entry into journalism, any training, previous roles, anything that illustrates your career path to date?* Could have been split up into a series of specific questions such as: *What is your current job title? What was your job title before this one? Do you have a qualification in journalism? Did you complete any work experience before being employed as a journalist? Have you completed any on the job training?* Though on balance, while this would have made the process simpler, having complex questions did allow for freer responses with some interviewees concentrating on one aspect of the question in their answer, while others concentrated on other aspects. This in itself was interesting and has led to the conclusion that this approach, although more time-consuming to code, was perhaps the best in ensuring leading questions from the interviewer, to elicit a directed response, were kept to a minimum.

As the coding process progressed, the initial questions became less important. The questions were only important in order to yield responses that offered up the coding. In fact, the very process of coding responses told the story of the research. By coding the responses, the key words and therefore the focus was revealed. Once all the initial coding of the interviews had been completed, text searches and word frequency charts were created, and matrix coding queries were able to be run pulling up results across all interviewees with all codes, selected codes, and/or selected interviewees.

* 1. **The surveys: mainstream newspaper and broadcast journalists**

To establish what mainstream journalists in the UK understand by the term esports, and to gain insight into the perceptions of these journalists about esports content being produced by their publications, including how this content is categorised, mainstream newspaper and broadcast journalists in the UK, were surveyed. Two consecutive surveys were conducted. The first survey was sent out in 2019 and was followed by a second in 2020. Data gathered from the surveys gave an indication as to the current interest in the sector and whether esports is considered a sport or whether it is considered as another area of journalism in the architecture of a news platform.

Both surveys were sent out to request participants using the same methods, the same platform, at the same time of year, and open for the same length of time; one month, from July 22nd to August 21st of 2019 and 2020. Although the core questions remained the same in each survey, there were some adjustments to the wording in some questions and the addition of some extra questions to respond to lessons learned from the first survey and to reflect any information gleaned from the interviews with the esports journalists. For example, one of the findings from the semi-structured interviews was the emphasis on business as a focus for esports content within endemic esports publications. This finding informed an additional option of business and finance as a category offered to the mainstream journalists in the question: ‘How is esports content categorised?’ in the second survey.

Also different from the first to the second survey was the change in wording of the aims in the introductory paragraph. This was amended to reflect the fact that there were two rounds of the same survey. The reason for surveying journalists twice was to note any changes that the launch of the ‘‘ePremier League’ may have had on the general knowledge of the term esports within mainstream media. For both surveys, participants remained anonymous unless the responder agreed to continue contributing to the research, in which case they were invited to leave their email address which revealed their identity. The platform Online Surveys was chosen as the survey software, recommended by the Postgraduate School at London South Bank University. The platform is used by many academics and states that the data collected on the site is “secure and strict information security standards are followed (ISO27001)” and that the data is “processed in compliance with GDPR” (Onlinesurveys.ac.uk, 2013)

Salant and Dillman (1996) observe that a prerequisite to sample selection is to define the target population as narrowly as possible. To this end, the target population for the surveys was defined as UK-based journalists working for one of the national newspapers or broadcasters as defined as mainstream media for this study, namely: the *Metro*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Evening Standard*, the *Daily Mirror*, the *Times*, the *Sun*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Daily Express*, the *Daily Star*, *I*, the *Financial Times*, the *Guardian*, ITV, BBC, Channel 4, Channel 5, SKY/SKY Sport and BT Sport. While I acknowledge that the *Evening Standard* is a local (to London) rather than a national newspaper, the size and reach of its audience online make it comparable to a national publication and so was included in the selection of publishers of interest.

The table below (Fig 4.9) shows the market share of both newspapers and broadcasters which formed the process of selection as the publishers defined as mainstream media. Market share was determined by size of audience.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
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| |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | NEWSPAPERS | | | | BROADCASTERS | | | *Metro* | 21,183,000 | *Daily Telegraph* | 16,067,000 | ITV | 51,652 | | *Daily Mail* | 26,062,000 | *Daily Express* | 472,000 | BBC | 55,481 | | *Evening Standard* | 12,230,000 | *Daily Star* | 12,622,000 | Channel 4 | 50,860 | | *Daily Mirror* | 774,000 | *I* | 8,978,00 | Channel 5 | 43,580 | | *The Times* | 15,791,000 | *\*Financial Times* | 15,051,102 | SKY/SKY Sport | 42,558 | | *The Sun* | 1,918,000 | *The Guardian* | 19,793,000 | BT Sport | 8,865 |   *Broadcasters Source: Broadcasters’ Audience Research Board (BARB), Dec, 2021*  *Newspapers Source: PAMCo 4 Bridge*, *2021*  *\*PWC Assured Monthly Global Reach (MGR) 2020* |

*Source: Filotrani, 2021*

Fig.4.9. Selecting newspapers and broadcasters

The corresponding numbers in the table show the size of audience for each publisher. Numbers indicate the total monthly reach by each publication/broadcaster and include all mediums of distribution, print, online, television.Publishers with approx. 500,000 plus viewers/readers were included. BT Sport falls below this line but has been included because it is the second largest producer of sports content in the UK behind SKY Sports. This makes it a publisher of interest. The total number of monthly views/readers for each publishers includes all mediums of distribution, print, online, and television.

The target number of responders for the surveys was set at what was considered to be a realistic population of 50. This relatively low number (relative to the estimated total possible population of journalists working for mainstream publications in the UK) was considered a realistic estimate based on the accepted reality of existing barriers of accessing contact information of journalists given that there is no central database of journalists employed in the UK. This, it was assessed, makes compiling a list of currently employed journalists for each organisation and acquiring their direct email address difficult. This is compounded by a high proportion of freelancers working within the profession (40% according to *Journalists at Work*, Spilbury, 2018) making moving between publications more prevalent and a list of journalists for each publication which is up-to-date more difficult. Newspaper websites do not provide a list of their current staff journalists with contact information. The setting of a low target for responders was also based on acknowledging the relatively few resources available for this study compared to the more extensive amount of resources available to larger studies. For example, *Journalists at Work* cited above is the most comprehensive report on the journalism industry in the UK. The report, based on an annual survey by the National Council of Training Journalists (NCTJ), has on average 800 respondents per survey. Proportionately, given the limited access to participants, the reliance on just one researcher instead of a team and the fewer funds available for this research, the target of 50 responders seemed an achievable target.

Using the *Journalists at Work* (JaW) survey as a benchmark, the total possible population of participants who would broadly qualify for the survey of this study (journalists working in the UK) is 73,000. This figure is according to the JaW report of 2018, which draws on data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) *Labour Force Survey* (LFS). The report states that there were approximately 73,000 people working as journalists in 2018 (Spilsbury, 2018). Of this number however only 29% fulfil the criteria for the surveys for this study. This is the percentage of the total population of journalists, according to the JaW report, who identify as working for traditional media. Traditional media is defined as newspapers and broadcasters. The remainder of the 73,000 journalists identify as working in other sectors than newspapers and broadcasters. These other sectors are defined as: public relations, book publishing, media representation, journals and periodicals, artistic creation and ‘other’. As the surveys for this study are focused on mainstream newspapers and broadcasters, only the 29% would meet the criteria. Therefore, the total possible population is estimated at 21,170.

The size of the total population is further decreased as more criteria are applied. As the focus of the surveys was on mainstream media perceptions of esports, it was deemed appropriate to restrict the request to participate in these two surveys to those journalists working on staff contracts, rather than freelance or part-time contracts, where the knowledge gained about esports could be seen to have come from outside of the organisation rather than a mainstream publication or broadcast. The journalists for the target sample were therefore those employed on permanent staff contracts. Taking this into account, the total population of 21,170 is further reduced to 12,702. This is because the JaW breaks down the total number of journalists working in the UK into those on permanent contracts versus contract or self-employed. According to data published in 2018, the percentage of journalists on permanent contracts was 60%, taking the total population that meet the criteria down to 12,702. According to the NCTJ, of this number, only 25% were working for national media in 2018*:* 13% working on national newspapers, 2% working on national radio, 6% working on national television and 4% working on cable/satellite (Spilbury, 2018).

Taking all these conditions into account the population estimate therefore was 25% of the number of people working as journalists in the UK on staff contracts (12,702) making a total estimated population for this survey 3,175 journalists. This is the total number of journalists who meet all of the criteria for the surveys for this study. That is, they were working for national newspapers and broadcasters in the UK on full time staff contracts. The target of 50 admittedly makes the responders for the surveys less than 2% of the possible total population, however, as other researchers have found “to gain a general sense of a belief or attitude” (*the aim of these two surveys*) “a lower level of precision may be acceptable [and so] a smaller sample size may then be drawn” (Priscilla, 2005, p. 2). I therefore had confidence in being able to use the responses from the surveys to gain the general sense from mainstream journalists about the esports sector.

Journalists working for one of the publications of interest were invited to take part in the surveys via emails, messages and Tweets. Email addresses were found using a combination of LinkedIn, Google, Twitter, newspaper/broadcaster websites and personal contacts. There doesn’t seem to be any consensus about the average response rate for online surveys in order to calculate how many invitations need to be sent in order to achieve a nominal target, in this case 50 responses. Response rates can be affected by a myriad of factors. Some of these include the length of the questions, the time it takes to fill in, the style and the aesthetic, how easy it is to navigate, how representative a survey is for the population of interest, how well the requested participant knows the organisation/person conducting the survey, and how confident the participant is in the confidentiality of the data collected. However, many studies range from between 15% (Sax, Gilmartin and Bryant, 2003; Shih and Fan, 2008; Kaplowitz, Hadlock and Levine, 2004) and 20-30% for online surveys, depending on the target population and survey design (Fincham, 2008). Therefore, in order to achieve 50 responders, it was calculated that if 300 people were invited to participate, and 50 did respond, the response rate would fall between this average.

To this end, for both surveys in 2019 and in 2020, 140 people were invited by direct messages sent using my own contacts on LinkedIn, 60 people were invited via direct messages on Twitter and 100 people were invited via direct emails using my professional contacts. In order to try and get a fair representation across the publishers of interest, the direct emails were sent to at least five journalists from each organisation. Researchers have found that personalizing the invitation to participate in the survey increases the likelihood of participation (Muñoz-Leiva et al., 2009) so it was hoped that using a direct messaging approach rather than an open call would encourage a response and emailing a similar number of people from each publication would enable a representative spread of responses from the publishers of interest. The request for participants was also posted on two open posts on both LinkedIn and Twitter, to maximise the potential for reaching the target of 50 responders. The data was collected once the surveys had closed.

For the response rate to be as high as possible the questions were kept to mostly multiple choice, as research indicates that open-ended questions are more difficult for responders to answer quickly (Sudman et al. 1996) and therefore less likely to be filled in, particularly in time-pressured environments such as newsrooms. Two open-ended responses were included but these responses were set as not required, meaning responders did not need to fill them in to complete the survey. Research on survey methodology highlights the importance of keeping the survey length manageable and not overly burdensome. (Tichenor and McIntyre 1999), so questions were kept to a minimum. Revisions to the 2019 survey for 2020, saw questions that had proven superfluous in the responses, eliminated. The table below (Fig.4.10) documents the changes to the questions in the survey sent out in 2019 compared to the survey sent out in 2020 and includes the rationale for those changes. The table also demarcates the mode of the question: multiple choice (MC) compared with open-ended (O/E) and yes/no questions (Y/N)*.*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| First survey 2019 | Second survey 2020 | Differences between the surveys |
|  | Q1. Did you fill in last year's survey (Familiarity with the term esports July 2019)? Y/N | By simply filling in the survey once an individual would come to the second survey with prior knowledge of the term esports, so it was important to be able to separate the results. |
|  | Q2. How did you find this survey? MC | I realised from the survey in 2019 that it would have been helpful to know which communication the participant was responding from |
| Q1. Do you work in the UK? Y/N | Q3. Do you work in the UK? Y/N |  |
| Q2. Which of the following best describes your work environment? MC | Q4. Who is your main employer? MC | I realised it would have been helpful to know who the employer is to cross reference the survey with the publishers of interest |
| Q3. Which medium do you most consistently to produce content? MC | Q5. Which medium describes the majority of content published by the team you work in? MC | Change of wording |
|  | Q6. Which area of content mostly describes your work? MC | I added this because I wanted to know the beats they were attached to – particularly I wanted to identify sports journalists to see whether they had different responses to journalists working on other desks |
|  | Q7. What has been the impact of COVID on your team coverage and/or your role? OE | This was a question only given to those responders who identified as sports journalists |
| Q4. Have you heard the term esports? Y/N | Q8. Have you heard the term esports? Y/N | Have you heard the term esports? Y/N |
| Q5. What do you think the term esports refers to? OE | Q9. Does your organisation publish esports content? Y/N | I changed this because I am just interested in the journalists’ knowledge of esports in terms of their employers not generally … |
| Q6. Is the term esports used within your newsroom/studio? Y/N |  | Chose not to include this as the answers from the first survey did not add anything to the research |
| Q7. In what capacity are you familiar with the term esports if not used in the workplace? OE |  | Chose not to include this as the answers from the first survey did not add anything to the research |
| Q8. Do you have any specific section/person responsible for covering esports? Y/N | Q10. Is there an esports specialist Y/N | Change of wording |
|  | Q11. If you don’t have an esports specialist, who is responsible for the content? MC |  |
| Q9. Where does your esports content sit? MC | Q12. How is the esports content categorised? MC | Change of wording for clarity – same categories given as choices with the added category of Business – this was prompted from information gleaned during the esports interviews. |
|  | Q13. Have you played EEA Sports *FIFA* Series? Y/N | New questions specifically on the *FIFA* tournament |
|  | Q14. Have you head of the ‘ePremier League’? Y/N |  |
|  | Q15. Did you watch the Finals of the tournament March 2019? Y/N |  |
|  | Q16. How did the coverage of the ‘ePremier League’ Finals compare with a real live football final, the FA Cup for example? OE |  |
| Q10. Depending on how you have answered so far, I may want to ask you some more detailed information via email … | Q17. Depending on how you have answered so far, I may want to ask you some more detailed information via email … |  |

Fig.4.10. Differences in survey questions: 2019/2020

The yellow boxes in the table (Fig.4.10) are questions that remained the same in both surveys; the red, questions that were reworded in the second survey; the blue are questions that only appeared in the first survey and finally the green are the questions that were new for the second survey. As can be seen by the number of green boxes, the second survey provided more detail than the first survey.

The first section of the survey was designed to understand the working environment of the journalist responder and to eliminate anyone working predominately outside the UK. In this section the survey was designed to find out whether there were any patterns in the esports knowledge. Initially the question ‘*Which of the following best describes your work environment* …’ was asked, with the choice of answers listed as ‘national newspaper, local newspaper, regional broadcaster, national broadcaster’. However, it became evident when the data was collected that what was missing, was the information about which publisher they worked for specifically, so that the data could be considered against the data from the content analysis. The question was therefore reworded for the 2020 survey to reflect the publishers of interest identified in the content analysis. The question became ‘Who is your main employer?’ with the choice of answers given ‘*Guardian’, ‘Times’, ‘Telegraph’, ‘Express’, ‘Mail’, ‘Financial Times’, ‘Independent’, ‘Mirror’, ‘Sun’, ‘Evening Standard’, ‘I’, ‘Metro’, Star’, ‘BBC’, ‘ITV’, ‘Sky’,* ‘*BT Sport’*, ‘Other’.

The second section of the survey was designed to find out understanding of the term esports, knowledge about esports content published by their employer, and most importantly how that content was categorised. Identifying how the content was categorised gave insight to how esports was perceived by mainstream media at the time of the survey. The third section on both the first survey and the second survey, was an opportunity for responders to leave a contact email for further participation in the research. On the second survey the third section also included additional questions specifically around *FIFA* Series and the ‘ePremier League’. This was because by the time of the second survey the tournament was in its second year so it was of interest to learn whether there was knowledge of this specific esports event. Lastly, questions concerning the impact of COVID were added in the 2020 survey, specifically for those responders identifying as sports journalists, as this information was deemed to be of interest in a year where on many occasions live sport was replaced with online esports events.

* 1. **The content analysis: mainstream media coverage, viewership, broadcast**

To understand how much or how little esports content is being published by mainstream media in the UK in order to determine the appetite for this genre of content, a content analysis of newspapers and broadcaster websites was conducted with the numbers of esports content per publisher recorded. While the analysis was specifically focused to find out about content covering *FIFA* *Series* and the ‘ePremier League’, the analysis also took note of historic esports content generally across all of the publishers of interest. As the study is concerned with mainstream media coverage of esports content predominately in the UK, the publishers of interest were the main newspaper outlets and the main broadcasters as already outlined in Fig.4.9.As the event chosen, the ‘ePremier League’ Finals, was streamed live on Twitch and YouTube both these platforms were identified as publishers of interest and formed part of the content analysis*.* Equally,as both the venue for the live Finals and the production company responsible for the broadcast of the ‘ePremier League’, Gfinity Studios was included in the analysis of published esports content, as was *FIFA*, the ‘English Premier League’, and the game publishers of *FIFA* *Series*, EA Sports. As these organisations are all involved with esports on some level, they were identified as publishers of interest and each of their sites was analysed for esports content.

For the analysis of the ‘ePremier League’ live Finals specifically, viewers of the live streams in both seasons on YouTube and on Twitch were monitored concurrently and the total daily views were recorded. This was to evaluate the size and engagement of the audience of the ‘ePremier League’ Finals, to understand differences between the distribution of content on these two platforms and to give some context to how much or how little content was being produced by mainstream media to cover the event, relative to the number of viewers. Lastly, to gain understanding for possible reasons for the low or high viewing figures of the live streams of the ‘ePremier League’ Finals, a retrospective content analysis of the broadcast in both seasons was completed.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| PREMIER LEAGUE CLUBS | | | |
| Season 1 2018/19 | | Season 3 2020/21 | |
| Manchester United | Southampton | Manchester United | Southampton |
| Manchester City | Bournemouth | Manchester City | Sheffield United |
| Chelsea | Crystal Palace | Chelsea | Crystal Palace |
| Arsenal | Newcastle United | Arsenal | Newcastle United |
| Tottenham Hotspur | Burnley | Tottenham Hotspur | Burnley |
| Everton | Fulham | Everton | Fulham |
| Wolverhampton Wanderers | Cardiff City | Wolverhampton Wanderers | West Bromwich Albion |
| Huddersfield Town | Brighton & Hove Albion | Leeds United | Brighton & Hove Albion |
| Leicester City | Watford | Leicester City | Aston Villa |
| Liverpool | West Ham United | Liverpool | West Ham United |

As the Finals of the ‘ePremier League’ were also streamed live by some of the Premier League on their club sites and because Premier League club sites regularly cover news and features, with many of the clubs declaring a vested interest in esports, these sites were also included as publishers of interest for the content analysis. The 20 clubs from season 1 and the 20 clubs from season 3 were analysed for esports content and coverage of the ‘ePremier League’ Finals. The table below (Fig.4.11) shows the clubs in both seasons. The yellow boxes show changes from one season to the next.

Fig.4.11. English Premier League clubs

The period designated for analysis of mainstream media coverage of the ‘ePremier League’ Finals was one day prior to the event, the days of the event and one day post the event in order to monitor promotion before the event started, reports as the event was in progress and after for the publishing of results. For season 1 this meant a total of four days (March 27 — 30) and for season 3 this meant a total of six days (March 22 — 27). Mainstream media coverage was monitored for the duration of the designated periods. Content was searched across the internet within the parameters set by the dates, March 27 – March 30 for season 1 and March 22 – 27 for season 3 using long tail key search terms: ‘ePremier League’; epl league; esports *FIFA* 19; Gfinity *FIFA* 19, *FIFA* 21; Gfinity *FIFA* 21, along with specific key search words for the identified publishers/platforms of interest. The number of published articles was recorded and observations about the types of content were noted. Observations included: whether the content was attributed to a journalist through a byline, how the content was categorised and the length of the articles. The medium of the content published was also recorded: video, audio, text, images. Also noted was the spelling of the word esports as an indicator of whether the accepted industry spelling had been adopted as part of a publisher’s house style or not. (See Chapter 2 for a discussion around the significance of the spelling).

Outside of the dates for the designated periods which was specific to the analysis of media coverage of the live Finals, a more generic search was conducted about esports content across the publishers of interest. This was to gain an overview of how much or how little focus there was on esports as a sector within mainstream media and to evaluate whether the media coverage of the ‘ePremier League’ was more or less consistent with coverage of the sector as a whole or whether the ‘ePremier League’ was an outlier. The terms ‘esports’ and the common way of misspelling the term ‘e-sports’ were searched on each site of the publishers of interest. Two dates were recorded in these searches, historic esports content up to March 2019 and then historic esports content up to March 2021. This allowed the content created and published between the two events to be recorded in order to ascertain any changes and/or patterns in publishing.

As well as analysing generic esports content across all the publishers, extra data was collected for the ‘Premier League’ Clubs. This was to ascertain the level of commitment and investment in both esports in general and to this specific tournament, given that all 20 Clubs participated in the tournament. It was also to gain some understanding about the relationship between esports and ‘real’ sport. Data was collected to show which Clubs streamed the live Finals on their sites. The social media presence of each Club on both Twitch and YouTube was also recorded. This aspect of the data collection was added to Season 3 after considering the importance of providing a picture of each Club’s presence on these two platforms, outside of the ‘ePremier League’, in order to contextualise the findings from the content analysis and viewership figures.

The content searches were conducted using Google Advanced search. This was a decision taken because a search engine capable of pulling in results from all the different types of publishers of interest was needed. A search engine such as Proquest for example would have been useful for newspaper content but not for content on Premier League football websites and so a different search tool would have had to be sourced. This would have been problematic for comparing the results. Alternatives to search engines were explored, such as using data scraping tools. There are various data scrapers which can trawl sites in order to monitor content on a website. However, these tools are not suitable for this part of the research as they work by scraping pages of the urls you input. This requires knowledge of the urls prior to the scrape. After evaluating possible alternatives it was decided that Google Advanced search would be the most effective. The main concern with using Google is the algorithms that are not disclosed by the company which rank the content and determine where it falls in terms of hierarchy on a results page. However, firstly, I was only interested in looking at the total numbers of content recorded by the search, not at assessing the most popular, so the order in which the content was pulled by the search, was irrelevant. I was only interested in the total number of articles. And secondly, I was comparing stats within the contained framework of Google, ie: not comparing one set of data from one search engine with another data set from Google, the results are therefore only relative to each other. Any qualitative data gathered was done so by reading the content and where possible I cross referenced the Google search with internal website searches to cross check the numbers (though a vast majority of sites use Google as their search engines, the Guardian is a good example of this.) The internal website searches that I did conduct proved consistent within a few numbers, as the Google Advanced search, so I was convinced of the numbers I recorded.

While I was convinced by the numbers returned in the searches, it must be noted that with all the search results conducted, the numbers do not necessarily indicate discreet, individual pieces of content – the search results include pages where one of the key words is mentioned for example – this could be just a link to a video or a piece of content that has also come up in the search. This is one of the limitations of using a search engine (and indeed the search function on individual sites). It is basic, even the advanced search is limited in how granular you can be with the filters; it is indiscriminate, in that it doesn’t identify and omit duplicated content, unless it is word for word. This then allows for one piece of content to be referenced multiple times on a site and each time it is referenced to show up as an individual result. One post could in fact generate any number of results, 100s in theory. The other issue with the undisclosed algorithm that Google search uses, is that it can throw up different numbers running exactly the same search within a relatively short period of time – 24 hours for example. This was mitigated by firstly making it clear that the recorded numbers were correct at the given date of the search and that the searches were completed in one day, rather than starting a search but not completing the task until a week later.

As the Finals were scheduled to stream live on the channels of the game publisher EA Sports on Twitch (@eEA Sports*FIFA*) and the main media partner SKY Sports on YouTube (@SKY Sportsfootball), both platforms were monitored during the live stream. Each day the numbers of viewers was recorded concurrently, every 30 minutes, on an Excel spreadsheet. In Season 3 SKY Sports increased its coverage on to Twitch (@SKY Sports) as well as YouTube (@SKY Sportsfootball) so both streams were monitored. Also new for Season 3 was a live stream by The Premier League on YouTube. As the event is a partnership between the game publisher EA Sports and the ‘English Premier League’, it was necessary to reflect the addition of the ‘Premier League’ coverage for Season 3. Online tracker sites were used to cross-reference primary data collected. For Twitch the site used was twitchtracker.com and for YouTube the site socialblade.com. The differences in live streaming channels can be seen in the table below (Fig.4.12).

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Platforms** | **Season 1 2019** | **Season 3 2021** | |
| **YouTube** | Sky Sports | Premier League | SKY Sports |
| **Twitch** | EEA Sports | EEA Sports | SKY Sports |

Fig.4.12. Streaming channels for the ‘ePremier League’: 2019/2021

What is clear to see by this table is the increase by 50% in the number of channels streaming the Finals in 2021. As will be demonstrated by the data however, the increase in channels did not translate into an increase in viewers.

Streaming in Season 1 started at 10am and ended at approximately 10pm on both days. Streaming in Season 3 started from 2pm and ended at 8pm on days 1 and 2 and on day the stream started at 6pm and ended at 10pm. Total viewership for each day was recorded at the end of the live stream. The reason for monitoring the traffic was to see if there were any correlations between spikes in viewers and the features of the broadcast and also to evaluate the validity of officially released data for the tournament by cross-referencing it with the primary data collected. This is because one of the consistent comments from industry professionals gathered during this research, was around the lack of a universally accepted metrics system causing questions over the credibility of esports audience statistics. Season 1 was compared with Season 3 to understand whether changes to the way the tournament was organised and covered by media had made any significant difference to the viewing audience.

Lastly, data was collected about the total audience for the tournament on YouTube and Twitch. This was new for Season 3 and was based on a calculation of the total content on YouTube and the total content on Twitch covering the event. The long-tail search term ‘ePremier League’ 21 was used to find any content related to Season 3. The viewers for each piece of content were added together to give the total audience for the event across these two platforms.

For the content analysis, the ‘ePremier League’ Finals of Season 1, 2018/2019 were compared with the Finals from Season 3, 2020/2021. A comparative approach was adopted rather than a single season analysis because 2018/2019 was the inaugural season and as such was experimental. It was therefore important to run the analysis again for a second time to allow for any adjustments to be made from lessons learned during the inaugural season. Initially the plan was to compare season 1 with Season 2 but the outbreak of COVID19 led to a modified tournament in Season 2, with the Finals taking place at a different time of year (August rather than March) and held remotely rather than streamed live from the Gfinity Studios in London. To achieve a like for like comparison, the study therefore takes the Finals in Season 3, 2020/2021 as the comparative. This event was scheduled at the same time of year (March) and held at the same venue (Gfinity studios), with the same media partners (SKY Sports), as the event in Season 1. The content analysis of both events from Season 1 and Season 3 followed the same methodology with some modifications to reflect the changes to the structure of the events and some additions to the data collection.

The main difference in Season 1 to Season 3 is the number of days on which the Finals took place. In Season 1 the Finals ran over two consecutive days which were streamed live continuously for 12 hours per day. The first day of the Finals was the console qualifiers – starting with the XBOX and then followed by the PS5. The following day was the knockout stage and finished with the cross-console finale. Both days started at 10am and finished at 10pm. In Season 3 the Finals were split over three days instead of two. The first two days ran consecutively and were given over to the console qualifiers — XBOX on the first day followed by PS5 on the second. Both days streamed live from 2pm – 8pm. There was a day off in between the qualifiers and the knockout stage, which took place on the final day from 6pm – 10pm ending the tournament with the cross-console finale. The differences in scheduling can be seen in the table below (Fig.4.13).

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **MARCH** | **SEASON 1 2019** | **SEASON 3 2021** | **Live streaming hours** |
| 22 |  | Media coverage analysed |  |
| 23 | Finals streamed 2pm – 8pm | 6 |
| 24 | Finals streamed 2pm – 8pm | 6 |
| 25 | Media coverage analysed |  |
| 26 | Finals streamed 6pm – 10pm | 4 |
| 27 | Media coverage analysed | Media coverage analysed | Total = 16 hours live streaming for Season 3 |
| 28 | Finals streamed 10am – 10pm |  | 12 |
| 29 | Finals streamed 10am – 10pm | 12 |
| 30 | Media coverage analysed | Total = 24 hours live streaming for Season 1 |
| Prizes | £0 | £40,000 |  |

Fig.4.13. Schedule differences the ‘ePremier League’ Finals: 2019/2021

The table shows a clear difference in the structure of the tournaments between Season 1 and Season 3 and in the total streaming hours.

The live streams of both seasons were analysed retrospectively. A sample of the stream was used to gather an understanding of the programme format. The first 45 minutes of the first day of the Finals of both Season 1 and Season 3 was used as the sample. This was to allow for the analysis of the opening of the tournament and the first couple of games, sampling all aspects of the broadcasts from the use of VTs (pre-recorded clips), the use of the studio, use of graphics, interviews, live casting and live match play. The following aspects were logged on an Excel spreadsheet: number of cameras used, types of shots, time given to presenters, time given to match play, use of audio, use of graphics, use of interviews, style of casting/commentating, scheduling/announcements. The reason for this analysis was to understand how the rundown of the broadcast had been created. Season 1 was compared with Season 3 to track any changes. (*A visual of the rundown can be found on p.214*.)

* 1. **Limitations of the methodology**

Other than limitations with NVivo and with Google Advanced search, both of which have already been discussed, the primary limitations of this study are that the sampling for the survey and semi-structured interviews was both small in reach and over-represented by newspaper journalists, the field of study was narrow in that it concentrated on just one esports title (*FIFA*) and a genre (SIM) that doesn’t represent the top tier esports titles currently.

For the interviews with esports journalists, the aim was to have at least one representative from each of the major publishers currently of esports content, namely: *The Esports Observer*, *Esports Insider*, *Esports News UK*, *Dot Esports*, *Dextero*. The table below (Fig.4.14) shows the aspirations for the study – the aim of publications compared with the reality of publications which were represented by respondents in the semi-structured interviews.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | AIM | | REALITY | | | | *The Esports Observer* | *Dexerto* | *The Esports Observer*  (2 interviewees) | *Dexerto* | Freelance | | *Esports Insider* | *\*Dot Esports* | *Esports Insider* | *Gfinity esports* |  | | *Esports News UK* |  | *Esports News UK* | *Daily Mirror* |  |   *\*No representative* |

Fig.4.14. Endemic esports publishers represented in the interviews

The composition of the sample group of esports journalists is over-represented by one publication (*The Esports Observer*), one key publication not represented at all (*Dot Esports*) and one who comes from outside of esports media (the only journalist currently employed by a mainstream media news organisation) and another who is freelance and so works for a number of publications. In an ideal environment it would have been good to get a representative from each of the main outlets of esports content in the UK, employed as staff journalists, covering the UK. In reality, this was not possible – which is in part a reflection of how the esports sector is covered. Given the comparatively small number of endemic esports publications operating currently, the number of journalists employed on staff contracts is small, and the way esports is covered means it is more likely that a journalist is responsible for covering a particular game rather than covering a particular patch or desk as in mainstream news. The journalists interviewed, although they covered UK news, were not solely covering the UK – but more often they were responsible for Europe and/or the US as well. In retrospect it would have been interesting to drill down on how the esports publications are organising their editorial departments – how they are attributing areas of content or responsibilities for games to their staff. Equally, it would be elucidating to do a deep dive into the workloads of individual esports journalists to find out exactly what proportion of their week is spent on editorial for example and what proportion is spent on commercial activities such as writing promotional material to understand what is meant by the term journalist when working for an endemic esports publication. It would then be useful to compare publications because there may be something to be learned about the differences between say the approach of entertainment focused publications versus the approach of business and finance focused publications and their corresponding division of journalist work loads. The driver of this study was not a comparison of esports publications however, but rather to gage how mainstream media was handling esports.

What cannot go without noting is the lack of diversity in the semi-structured interviews. All interviewees are white, male, between the ages of 25 – 40. This is reflective of the job market. While robust data relating to esports employability specifically is yet to be collected, we can draw some comparisons from research into the gaming sector. According to the Gaming Census conducted by UKie[[13]](#footnote-14) in 2020, two thirds working in the sector are aged 35 and under and only 25% of those employed in gaming are female, with just 10% identifying as BAME.

The survey sample also proved somewhat limiting in that it is composed of a majority of journalists working for national newspapers on news desks. This was a signficant majority - 56%. Rather than a balance of newspaper and broadcast journalists working across a spread of desks, the sample rather reflects my own background as a news journalist working for a national newspaper. This is fundamentally because those who responded and were happy to take part for Survey 1 (S1) were from my own network. Having exhausted my newspaper contacts for S1 there was more of a spread in terms of sector in Survey 2 (S2) – although there was still a majority of newspaper journalists covering news rather than from any area.

In terms of the medium that the respondents worked in – there was a predominance of written content over and above anything else. In S1. 71% respondents identified as working with text as opposed to 21% working in some form of video content – either online or for television. The same majority existed in S2. With 68% respondents identifying with text. In retrospect the wording of these categories is somewhat restrictive. The category video does not allow for live content for example, and although qualifying the category with the words television and online, the category video could denote pre-recorded content rather than live – an issue that is equally applicable to the category audio.

In S2 a further two questions were asked regarding the workplace in order to gain more granular detail concerning the types of content produced and the knowledge of esports. The two extra questions were: who is your employer and which area of content mostly describes your work? The largest employer of respondents was the BBC, followed by the Guardian and the Sun. In terms of the areas of journalism the respondents identified with, world news followed by UK news, were the top two categories (a total of 52%). It is worth noting once again the impact my own background may have had on these results. The researcher bias is that I am from a news background and therefore those accepting the invitation to take part could have been skewed more towards news.

Any conclusions drawn therefore should be on the understanding that the responses tell us mostly about those journalists working on news desks. The next largest category that was represented was those journalists working within sports (21%). Taking both surveys together then, we can conclude that the vast majority of the journalists who participated identified as working with written content as opposed to video or audio content were employed by a newspaper organisation, and worked on a newsdesk. The results drawn from these surveys must therefore caveat both the sector, the medium and the area of journalism.

With a wider selection of journalists representative of all genres of journalism a stronger conclusion could have been drawn from the questions asked. As it stands, the findings must be caveated by the parameters of the sampling. That the conclusions arrived at are done so on the understanding that the responses are from a small sample of journalists and are not exhaustive. While the narrow sample of people interviewed can mean that the observations can be only interpreted anecdotally, as Sue Turnbull (2020) highlights in her discussion of David Morley (2006) and the value of ethnographic studies, being able to cross-reference these data sets against the empirical data collected from the content analysis, and the semi-structured interviews, goes some way to mitigate this.

It is acknowledged that this study is limited in its reach, confining itself to one particular area of esports, that of SIM games and specifically just one title, *FIFA*. Furthermore, *FIFA* is not one of the most popular esports titles. According to Newzoo[[14]](#footnote-15) *FIFA* doesn’t feature in the top 10 games on Twitch and in fact there are no SIM games at all in the top ten. Therefore, caution needs to be applied to conclusions drawn about esports in general based solely on one title which is not featured as one of the most popular and in a genre that is relatively small in terms of viewership – that of simulated sports. The table below (Fig.4.15.) shows the top 10 games watched on Twitch in November 2021, and while not all of these games are esports titles, namely *Grand Theft Auto V* and *Minecraft*, eight of them are definitively esports titles.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | | 1. | Grand Theft Auto V | | 2. | League of Legends | | 3. | Counter-Strike: Global Offensive | | 4. | Valorant | | 5. | Apex Legends | | 6. | Minecraft | | 7. | Fortnite | | 8. | Call of Duty: Modern Warfare/Warzone | | 9. | Teamfight Tactics | | 10. | Dota 2 | |

Fig.4.15. Top 10 Most Watched Games on Twitch Nov 2021

This chapter has outlined the methodology employed to address the research question of this study: What factors contribute to the limited coverage of esports by mainstream media in the UK? By adopting a mixed-methods approach, using interviews, surveys and content analysis, this research aims: (1) To gage the landscape of esports journalism in the UK, (2) To gage perception of esports by mainstream media, (3) To establish knowledge of the term ‘esports’ by mainstream media, (4) To establish how esports content is categorised by mainstream media (5) To quantify how much esports content is covered by mainstream media (6) To quantify the size of viewership of a live esports event, (7) To analyse a broadcast of a live esports event. The chosen methods align with the study's theoretical framework, Diffusion of Innovation (Rogers, 2006) and are appropriate for investigating the research question in a rigorous and comprehensive manner. The methodology presented in this chapter sets the foundation for Chapter 5, where the findings are presented and analysed. A discussion of these findings in the context of the research question and existing literature follows in Chapter 6.

**Chapter 5:**

Mainstream Media and the Esports Divide: An Analysis of Coverage, Journalism, and Audience Engagement in the UK

The findings from the study confirm the initial observations that the coverage of the esports sector by mainstream media in the UK is scarce. This is true for all esports, even an esports title that is a simulated sports game and as such understood by a mainstream audience, as is the case for *FIFA*, and the game of football. The data indicates that the relationship between the functionality that drives mainstream media and that which drives esports newswork and esports journalists is tenuous. Analysis of the data indicates that simply having an esports title which simulates a real sport is not enough to make it attractive to mainstream media nor does it create a gateway to the esports sector. These points are evidenced by the quantity of esports content recorded on mainstream media websites and the types of content being covered. The examination of the ‘ePremier League’ and the live Finals specifically, suggests a lack of appetite by mainstream to cover the sector.

The findings of this research are organised into four sections, with data from the content analysis, surveys, and semi-structured interviews being cross-referenced for each section.

The first section, 5.2, focuses on **mainstream media and esports coverage**, revealing that mainstream media does not cover esports in a significant way. Key findings in this section show that broadcasters produce more esports content than newspapers, with a particular focus on football esports content. There is also a disconnect between mainstream media and endemic esports media, with mainstream media often lacking clarity about esports content.

The second section, 5.3, examines **esports journalism** and its unique characteristics. The key findings indicate that esports journalists often lack formal training within journalism and do not always identify as journalists. Esports journalism relies heavily on press releases, and esports journalists tend to have less freedom to report than their mainstream counterparts. Additionally, mistrust exists between esports media and mainstream media.

The third section, 5.4, delves into **esports titles and tournaments**, specifically focusing on *FIFA* and ‘the ‘ePremier League’’. The findings suggest that football clubs are interested in engaging with esports but not necessarily with the ‘ePremier League’. The Premier League did not sufficiently consider the role of mainstream media in promoting esports events, and the design of an esports title or event impacts its mainstream media coverage. Esports production companies also differ from traditional sports broadcasters in the roles they fulfill.

Finally, the fourth section, 5.5, explores **the platforms of distribution**, specifically Twitch and YouTube. The key findings indicate that the ‘ePremier League’ Finals had low viewer numbers and that metrics for viewer engagement are not reliable. Twitch outperforms YouTube for esports live streams, but football fans predominantly use YouTube as their platform of choice for content consumption.

**5.2. Mainstream media and esports coverage**

This section presents findings which demonstrate mainstream newspapers cover esports differently to mainstream broadcasters. This is evidenced by the quantities of content, the genre of esports content and how this content is categorised. Broadcasters produce more esports content than newspapers, though it is only sport-focused broadcasters that are producing a significant amount of esports content and there is a difference to be found between those broadcasters which have terrestrial television channels and those which have subscription channels. Esports content is not covered on terrestrial television in the UK. The findings demonstrate that newspapers cover a wider range of esports games than broadcasters and use a wider range of categories to describe the content. Broadcasters only use categories related to sport or football for *FIFA*-related content.

There are four key findings: (1) broadcasters produce more esports content than newspapers, (2) broadcasters cover different esports to newspapers, (4) broadcasters categorise *FIFA* esports as sport and football, (5) mainstream media is not clear about esports content.

**Key finding: (1) Broadcasters produce more esports content than newspapers**

On average, broadcast media produces 50% more esports content than newspapers currently in the UK. This is evidenced by comparing the total pieces of content covering esports found on each site. Across all the publishersSKY Sports has the most esports content overall, at 12,500 pieces of content, Channel 5 has the least, at two pieces of content. Newspapers have 50% less content on esports. The *Financial Times* is the newspaper that has the most content at 3,400 and the *I* has the least, at 233 pieces of content. By way of contextualizing these numbers, SKY Sports has 21,300,000 pieces of content on football (*correct as of 02/06/21*). The first esports article SKYSports.com is dated in the same year as there is consistent (weekly news and features) coverage of football, 2012. This equitable time period demonstrates that coverage of esports compared with football, is marginal. The timeline below (Fig.5.1) charts the earliest to the most recent mainstream UK broadcaster or newspaper to cover esports.

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| *Source: Filotrani 2021* |

Fig.5.1. Timeline: esports content in mainstream media

This timeline clearly shows esports as a genre of entertainment was not covered by mainstream media in the UK prior to 2009, with the early adopters all newspapers rather than broadcasters. This is at odds with the findings outlined above (and in the table below Fig.5.2) which demonstrate more esports content on broadcaster websites than newspaper websites.

Fig.5.2. shows a significant difference between broadcasters which produce programmes predominantly for terrestrial television compared with broadcasters distributing programmes via subscription channels*.* SKY Sports, the BBC and BT Sport are the broadcasters which have the most content. SKY Sports and BT Sport are both subscription services.

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| |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | BROADCASTERS | *esports content* | NEWSPAPERS | *esports content* | | SKY Sports | 12,500 | *Financial Times* | 3,400 | | BBC | 9,500 | *Daily Mail* | 3,200 | | BT Sport | 2,500 | *Metro* | 1,900 | | \*SKY | 446 | *The Guardian* | 1,600 | | ITV | 39 | *Standard* | 1,200 | | Channel 4 | 7 | *Daily Express* | 1,000 | | Channel 5 | 2 | *Independent* | 804 | | *\*Distinction made between SKY and SKY Sports demonstrates difference in entertainment/sports site coverage* | | *Daily Telegraph* | 735 | | *Daily Mirror* | 626 | | *Daily Star* | 540 | | *The Sun* | 427 | | *The Times* | 352 | | *i* | 233 |   *The numbers correspond to the total number of articles (pieces of esports content) found on each site. Numbers correct as of 02/06/2021*  *Source: Filotrani, 2021* |

Fig.5.2. Total esports content on broadcaster and newspaper sites

The table clearly shows that the BBC is the only broadcaster producing programmes for terrestrial television, though the esports content on the BBC is not broadcast on its terrestrial channels, it is found on its sports section of its website bbc.co.uk/sport and on its on-demand service, IPlayer. The other terrestrial television channels in the UK have insignificant amounts of coverage of esports on their websites: ITV has a total of 39 pieces of esports content on its website, itv.com, Channel 4 has seven, Channel 5 has two pieces of content.

One of the reasons for there being more esports content on the BBC website than ITV, Channel 5 and Channel 4 is likely to be because the BBC has a strong news remit. Furthermore, the BBC has a significant proportion of its programming schedule dedicated to sport. For this reason, it is important to apply caution when making a direct comparison between the BBC and the other three terrestrial channels, which do not have the same programming nor are their websites news platforms. While ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5 do broadcast news, these news programmes are produced by ITN, a third-party production company. To assess esports coverage as a percentage of the news on these channels, I searched for esports content on ITN.com but it returned a zero response (*correct as of 02/06/21*). This confirms that esportswas not a topic of interest from a news, sports or entertainment perspective.

Looking at the ‘ePremier League’ specifically, the data tells us that this tournament was not of interest to newspapers or broadcasters. Content covering this particular tournament accounts for less than a third of the total *FIFA* content on mainstream media websites. The table below (Fig.5.3) shows that broadcasters covered the ePL more than newspapers (38% and 26% respectively). SKY Sport produced the most content, with 3,450 pieces of content on its site. This is significantly more than the next biggest publisher, the BBC, with 420 pieces of content. Of the total amount of content produced by broadcasters on the ‘ePremier League’, SKY Sports accounts for 87% of the coverage, the BBC 11%, BT Sport 7%, ITV 1%, Channel 4 less than 1%.

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| |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Broadcaster | *FIFA* content | | ‘ePremier League’ content | | Percentage of ePL to general *FIFA* content | | SKY Sports | 4k | 3.5k | | 88% | | | BBC | 6.3k | 420 | | 7% | | | BT Sport | 56 | 30 | | 56% | | | SKY | 30 | 7 | | 23% | | | ITV | 5 | 5 | | 100% | | | Channel 4 | 3 | 1 | | 33% | | | Channel 5 | 0 | 0 | | 0 | | | Total | 10,394 | 3,963 | | 38% | |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Newspaper | *FIFA* content | ePL content | Percentage of ePL to general *FIFA* content | | *Financial Times* | 177 | 26 | 15% | | *Daily Mail* | 3k | 62 | 2% | | *Metro* | 551 | 134 | 24% | | *The Guardian* | 244 | 1 | 0.4% | | *Standard* | 376 | 42 | 11% | | *Daily Express* | 297 | 7 | 3% | | *Independent* | 106 | 7 | 7% | | *Daily Telegraph* | 203 | 15 | 7% | | *Daily Mirror* | 534 | 381 | 71% | | *Daily Star* | 200 | 37 | 19% | | *Sun* | 203 | 25 | 12% | | *The Times* | 102 | 54 | 53% | | *i* | 42 | 5 | 12% | | Total | 3,035 | 796 | 26% |   ***\*****All numbers rounded up*  *Source: Filotrani 06/2021* |

Fig.5.3. Total ‘ePremier League’ content on broadcaster and newspaper sites

The table shows the percentage of ‘ePremier League’ content to *FIFA*-esports content, and it is interesting to note that the BBC which proportionally dedicates most of its esports coverage to *FIFA* (66%) only has 7% focused on the ‘ePremier League’. Of the newspapers, The Daily Mirror covered the ‘ePremier League’ the most. It has 381 pieces of content on its website, equating to 71% of its *FIFA*-related content. Conversely, The *Daily Mail* with the most *FIFA* content dedicates just 2% to the tournament.

Content covering the live Finals specifically in 2019 and 2021 further demonstrates how little interest was generated by the tournament in mainstream media. In total, there were 15 articles published in 2019 and 22 in 2021. SKY Sports has only nine articles in total covering both periods. This number is matched by the BBC. BT Sport has one piece of content published during the Finals in 2021, but nothing in the period for 2019. SKY has one piece of content published during the Finals in 2019 but nothing for the period of the 2021 Finals. This is the same for ITV. The *Daily Mail*, the newspaper with the most *FIFA*-related content, did not publish any content in either period. Nothing in the 2019 Finals and nothing in the 2021 Finals. While there was a 32% increase in coverage from 2019 to 2021, with 22 pieces in total compared to 15 in 2019, there was a decrease in the number of publishers producing it, from nine publishers in 2019 to just five in 2021. The diagram below (Fig.5.4) shows how little coverage the ‘ePremier League’ Finals garnered by mainstream media.

*Source: Filotrani 06/2021*

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Fig.5.4. ‘ePremier League’ Finals – articles on broadcaster and newspaper sites

The numbers on the chart (Fig.5.4) are the total pieces of content published one day prior to the event starting, the days of the event themselves and one day post event. The Finals in both years did not reach double figures of coverage by any mainstream media outlet. More than half (54%) of the publishers which covered the Finals in 2019 did not repeat the coverage in 2021. By these metrics, the ‘ePremier League’, and particularly the live Finals, was not a success.

**Key finding: (2) Broadcasters cover different esports to newspapers**

Analysis of the genre of content covered by publishers reveals significant differences between broadcasters and newspapers. The data collected here shows that 83% of the total esports content on mainstream broadcaster sites is dedicated to football, and the game of *FIFA* as demonstrated in the table below. The table below shows the percentages of *FIFA*-related content to general esports content on broadcaster websites.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
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| |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Broadcaster | Historic esports content | *FIFA* content | % *FIFA* to general  esports content | | SKY Sports | 12.5k | 4k | 32% | | BBC | 9.5k | 6.3k | 66% | | BT Sport | 2.5k | 56 | 2% | | SKY | 446 | 30 | 9% | | ITV | 39 | 5 | 13% | | Channel 4 | 7 | 3 | 43% | | Channel 5 | 2 | 0 | 0 | | Total | 12,487 | 10,394 | 83% |   *All numbers rounded up*  *Source: Filotrani 06/2021* |

Fig.5.5 Percentage of FIFA-esports content on broadcaster sites

The distinction shown in the table between broadcasters which have general news and entertainment channels (Channel 5, Channel 4, ITV and SKY) and those broadcasters which have a sports-focus is marked. This is particularly noticeable when comparing SKY with SKY Sports: general entertainment compared with sports (446 and 12,500 pieces of content, respectively)*.* Channel 5, a general entertainment terrestrial television channel has no content on *FIFA*. As *FIFA* is a football game, the relatively high volume of content appearing on sports-focused sites makes sense.

By comparison, the data shows that 19% of esports coverage on newspaper websites is dedicated to football, and the game of *FIFA* as is demonstrated in the table below*.* The table (Fig.5.6) shows the percentages of *FIFA*-related content to general esports content on newspaper websites.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
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| |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Newspaper | Historic esports content | *FIFA* content | Percentage of *FIFA* to general esports content | | *Financial Times* | 3.4k | 177 | 5% | | *Daily Mail* | 3.2k | 3k | 94% | | *Metro* | 1.9k | 551 | 29% | | *The Guardian* | 1.6k | 244 | 15% | | *Standard* | 1.2k | 376 | 31% | | *Daily Express* | 1k | 297 | 30% | | *Independent* | 804 | 106 | 13% | | *Daily Telegraph* | 735 | 203 | 28% | | *Daily Mirror* | 626 | 534 | 85% | | *Daily Star* | 540 | 200 | 37% | | *The Sun* | 427 | 203 | 48% | | *The Times* | 352 | 102 | 29% | | *i* | 233 | 42 | 18% | | Total | 16,017 | 3,035 | 18.9% |   *Source: Filotrani 06/2021*  *All numbers rounded up* |

Fig.5.6. Percentage of FIFA-esports content on newspaper sites

Newspapers contrast significantly to broadcasters in their coverage of esports. Taken in total, the table shows that only 19% of esports coverage on newspaper websites is *FIFA* content. This tells us that newspapers cover a different range of esports than broadcasters*.* Looking at individual papers however, there are two anomalies: 94% of The *Daily Mail*’s esports’ coverage and 85% of the *Mirror’s* coverage is dedicated to *FIFA*. These two newspapers have more *FIFA*-related content than any other esports content. The *Daily Mail* has a high proportion of sports content and lists sporting events, football and boxing as its top themes. With the highest market share of online audience of all the newspapers (*Ipsos, 2021*) and a substantial section of sports, it is unsurprising that it has the most *FIFA* esports content of all the newspapers. In fact, the *Daily Mail* accounts for 99% of all *FIFA* content across newspapers in the UK.

Similarly, the *Daily Mirror*, known for its sports coverage, is notably the only newspaper to currently employ an esports journalist. Nathan Bliss, one of the esports journalists interviewed as part of this research, produces content predominantly on esports and gaming titles which are football related. The high percentage of *FIFA* esports content on the *Mirror* is therefore understandable. All the other newspapers have significantly less than 50% of their coverage dedicated to *FIFA*. Interestingly the paper with the most esports content overall, The *Financial Times*, has the least *FIFA* content. Less than 5% of its total esports content is covering *FIFA*. The Financial Times is a business and finance focused newspaper and does not have a significant proportion of its journalism dedicated to sport.

What the data doesn’t show is what other esports titles are being covered by the publishers. Similar to the Financial Times with 5% of its esports content covering *FIFA*, BT Sport has only 2% of coverage. As this is the first study to consider how mainstream media is covering esports in the UK, a further study at a more granular level is needed to understand which esports titles the publishers are covering. Researchers could question whether the publishers with a significant amount of sports content are only covering simulated sports titles or whether they are covering other genres of esports such as multiplayer online battle arena video game: *League of Legends*, for example.

With BT Sport what is interesting to note is that in 2020 it signed a multi-year sponsorship deal with one of the leading *League of Legends* teams in the UK, Excel Esports, a non-sports-related esports title, and yet looking at its website section dedicated to esports, there is no category to house games such as *League of Legends*, instead there are just two for sports-related games; Formula 1 and Football. Furthermore, the choice on the website to capitalize the letter ‘s’ in the term esports places the emphasis on the word sports: ‘eSports’. What this suggests is a lack of clarity about what esports means for BT Sport. Comments made by chief operating officer Jamie Hindhaugh, that long-term BT Sports was not the platform for esports nor subscription channels in general and that esports is not a sport replacement, support this view. (Dixon, 2020)

What the data does demonstrate and what is a consideration for the esports’ industry is that these findings suggest sports-simulated esports titles, in this case football, are of interest to the mainstream media publishers which have a significant output of sports content. For these publishers esports equals sports. For the mainstream media publishers which do not have a significant output of sports content, esports is of lesser interest. For these publishers esports is not classified as sports. There is a dichotomy here which reflects discourse within academia concerning the definition of the term esports. For example, Parry, in his article *E-sports are not sports* (2018) argues that esports should not be classified as sports. Parry's position is that esports, while competitive and skill-based, do not possess the necessary physicality, embodiment, and other characteristics typically associated with traditional sports, and therefore should not be classified as sports. Jenny et al. (2016) however argue that, while there are some differences between esports and traditional sports in terms of physicality, esports meet many of the criteria for classification as sport and should be considered as such.

The issue remains, as already underlined in Chapter 2, that the term currently encapsulates both non-sport related games and sport-related games and I argue this makes the genre difficult to place within the architecture of a news website and ergo, less likely to be covered by mainstream media.

**Key finding: (3) Broadcasters categorise *FIFA* esports as sport and football**

Looking at the way content is categorised on broadcaster and newspaper website tells us how esports is perceived as a genre of content. For *FIFA* content, broadcasters only use categories related to sport, football and esports whereas newspaper publishers use a wider selection of categories. The chart below shows the categories used to describe *FIFA*-esports content.

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| |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Categories | Newspaper and Broadcast media | | | | | | | | | **Sport** | BT Sport | Channel 4 | *i* | BBC | *Guardian* | SKY Sports | *Mirror* | *Mail* | | **esports** | BT Sport | *Independent* | *FT* | BBC | *Guardian* | *Telegraph* | | **Tech** | *Sun* | *Star* | *FT* | *Mirror* | | **Games/gaming** | *Metro* | *Star* | *FT* | *Guardian*  *Source: Filotrani, 2021* | | **Football** | SKY Sports | BBC | | ***FIFA*** | *Mail* | *Express* | | **Other sports** | *Standard* | | **Entertainment** | *Metro* | | **Science** | Mail | | **Markets** | *FT* | |

Fig.5.7. Categories of esports by newspapers and broadcasters

The table shows that newspapers use categories: tech, games/gaming, *FIFA*, other sports, entertainment, science and markets but broadcasters categorise the content as football. What is particularly noticeable is that there is no business category for *FIFA* content on either broadcaster or newspaper website, although all content by the *Financial Times* technically comes from the angle of business and finance as this is the focus of the publication. The *Metro* is the only publisher to place the content under entertainment.

The variety of categories used on mainstream publisher websites is echoed by the journalists surveyed for this study. Mainstream journalists displayed little consensus in their answers about which category esports falls under as is demonstrated in the chart below. The chart (Fig.5.8) below shows the responses in the first survey in 2019 and the second survey in 2020 to the question: ‘How is esports content categorised by your publisher?’

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| **A picture containing logo  Description automatically generated**  *Source: Filotrani, 2021* |

Fig.5.8 Journalist responses to categories of esports content

The chart shows the three most popular categories averaged across both surveys were: sports (35.5%), gaming (21.5%) and tech (19%).This is not in line with the findings from the interviews with the esports journalists. When cross referencing the data what is noticeable is the discrepancy around the categories, entertainment, sports and business. Esports’ journalists categorise esports content as either business or entertainment, never sport. The only esports journalist to classify esports as sports is Nathan Bliss, the journalist employed by a mainstream publisher, the *Mirror*. Furthermore, 50% of the esports journalists identified as business journalists. Only 4% of mainstream journalists surveyed in 2020 think esports is categorised as business, with 0% choosing entertainment to describe the content.

The data collected about the categorisation of esports is significant because it firstly tells us that newspapers do not view esports in the same way as broadcasters. Broadcasters see *FIFA* esports as a sport. Secondly, it is important because it highlights a disconnect between mainstream media and endemic esports media. Currently endemic esports’ publishers fall within two areas: either business and finance or entertainment. *The Esports Observer* and *Dexerto*, respectively, are cases in point. Sport as a category is not referenced by the esports journalists interviewed for this study. This signifies a misalignment between mainstream media and esports media in the UK.

**Key Finding: (4) Mainstream media is not clear what esports is being covered**

More than a third (37%) of responders in the surveys thought their publisher employed an esports journalist. This the data finds, is not the reality. At the time of this research only one dedicated esports journalist was employed across newspapers and broadcasters. Looking at coverage of the ‘ePremier League’ Finals specifically, there were four named journalists, two in 2019 and two in 2021. The rest of the content was unattributed. Attributing content to a journalist through a byline is a key indicator of original reporting. A byline is a line in a newspaper, magazine, or online article that attributes the authorship of the piece to a specific individual or group. It typically appears at the beginning of an article, just below the headline, and includes the author's name and sometimes additional information, such as their job title, affiliation, or a brief bio. Bylines give credit to the person who wrote the article and help readers identify the author's perspective and expertise on the subject matter. In 2019, 53% of the content covering the Finals was produced by one journalist and of this content only 20% included original reporting in the form of interviews (one out of five articles). The remaining 80% took the form of highlights of matches and/or information about the tournament. In 2021, two out of 22 pieces of content were attributed to a journalist through a byline. This means less than 10% of content covering the Finals in 2021 by mainstream media was original reporting. This, together with the low quantity of content covering the sector by all publishers would suggest that there is very little resource allocated to esports within mainstream media. This is contrary to perceptions held by mainstream journalists that there are dedicated journalists covering esports for their publishers.

The data does show an increased awareness of the term esports over the 12-month period between the two surveys sent out in 2019 and 2020, amongst mainstream journalists: 78% of the journalists surveyed in 2019 and 90% in 2020 responded yes to being familiar with the term esports and to hearing it used in the newsroom. But this increase in awareness cannot be attributed to an increase in content being published, as the data demonstrates. More than half (54%) of the publishers which covered the ‘‘ePremier League’ Finals’ in 2019 for example did not cover the Finals in 2021. The reason for the increased awareness within mainstream journalists could however be linked to the pandemic. Esports tournaments replaced many of the banned live sport during lockdown. For example, football, in the UK, was replaced by many esports tournaments held online with professional footballers competing against each other on *FIFA*, individually and in friendlies club against club. That the findings from the survey showed an increased awareness of the term esports by mainstream journalists from 2019 to 2020 is therefore unsurprising. What is surprising is that this increase in awareness did not translate into an increase in coverage of esports content by mainstream media.

**5.3. Esports journalists**

This section presents findings which demonstrate some significant differences for journalists working for endemic esports publications compared to journalists employed by mainstream media. These differences include entry into the profession, expectations of the role, types of content they produce, and the day-to-day practice of generating copy. The esports journalists expressed having a reliance on press releases at the expense of original reporting in esports, though this is not exclusive to endemic esports publications, it is also a distinguishing feature of esports mainstream media coverage as well, as has already been referenced by the lack of bylines in coverage of the ‘ePremier League’. Esports journalists also expressed a lack of formal training and experience within journalism, a lack of freedom to cover stories independently and a hesitancy in using the word journalist to describe themselves. The data would suggest that the term journalist is less relevant within the esports sector. There is a mistrust amongst esports journalists about mainstream media covering the sector. Misspelling of the term esports and regular inaccuracies and misrepresentative angles for stories are reasons highlighted for this mistrust and the BBC is identified as the publisher which makes the biggest sector errors.

There are five key findings: (1) esports journalists lack formal training within journalism, (2) esports journalists don’t identify as journalists, (3) esports journalism is reliant on press releases, (4) esports journalists have less freedom to report than mainstream journalists, (5) esports media mistrusts mainstream media.

**Key finding: (1) Esports journalists lack formal training within journalism**

The table below (Fig.5.9) shows that 37.5% of esports journalists hold journalism degrees or equivalent qualifications and 25% had some form of journalism experience on a publication prior to taking up their current role*.* 62.5% have neither qualifications in journalism nor have previous industry work experience. 75% describe their entry into a career as an esports journalist by either starting their own blog or by contributing to a blog, producing content in their spare time for free. Just 25% of esports journalists use the word journalist to describe their current role.

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| |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | |  | Ashton | Fitch | Patterson | Sacco | Trout | Stubbs | Bliss | Murray | | | Q1. Journalism degree or equivalent? | | | | | | | | |  | |  |  |  |  |  |  | | 1. | Yes | No | No | Yes | No | No | Yes | No | | Q2. Journalism industry experience? | | | | | | | | | | 2. | No | No | No | Yes | No | No | Yes | No | | Q3. Background in blogging? | | | | | | | | | | 3. | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | | Q4. Previous role? | | | | | | | | | | 4. | Marketing | Blogger | Senior writer | Journalist | Community manager | Freelance Journalist | Freelance journalist | Sales | | Q5. Current role? | | | | | | | | | | 5. | Writer | Editor | Editor | Editor | Editor | Journalist | Journalist | Writer | | Q6. Publication focus? | | | | | | | | | | 6. | Business | Business | Entertainment | News | Business | News | Sport | News | |

*Source: Filotrani, 2021*

Fig.5.9. Esports journalist backgrounds

The data in the table is significant when comparing against mainstream journalism where 98% of new entrants have an undergraduate degree in journalism and 36% a Masters (Newman, 2015). 87% have completed a period of work experience in the industry before entering the profession (Spilsbury, 2018).

With 62.5% not having completed any education in journalism and 75% not having any prior work experience before working as a journalist, this explains why many of the esports journalists interviewed expressed difficulties with some of the basic skills needed for reporting. Editor of the *Esports Insider*, Fitch, explains he started with “very limited writing and journalism experience” (Fitch, Interview, 08/07/20).Senior writer Murray (2020) illustrates further: “I had to Google how to do transcription the first time I got an interview and for the first several years, I was doing email interviews only because I didn't know how to record a phone interview. There's a lot of those sorts of basic simple, techniques and experiences that a lot of writers in the esports space just don't have” (Murray, Interview, 3/12/20).

The lack of practical skills is not the most significant issue about the lack of formal training, however. More important to the tools needed in order to complete a commission, no journalism education, no prior experience in the industry and only blogging to draw upon (as 75% describe their background prior to their current roles), suggests many could face difficulty in distinguishing the difference between a factual report and an opinion piece [[15]](#footnote-16)(NUJ 2011; IPSO, 2021b). They may lack the rigor to check the verisimilitude of a story for facts or how to substantiate claims and verify and credit data for stories. They may not understand how a press release is manufactured and the may not feel confident about independently sourcing a story. Furthermore, not having any formal training means it is highly probably that esports journalists have not been exposed to media law. Libel, defamation, slander, copyright and potential criminal convictions from compromising a court case, are all very real concerns for journalists. It is not possible to work as a journalist for any mainstream publisher in the UK without demonstrating knowledge of media law, either in the form of a degree or of a National Council for Training Journalists[[16]](#footnote-17) (NCTJ) qualification, or from regular in-house training modules.

While the esports journalists weren’t asked specifically about their knowledge of media law, the fact that 62.5% of them have had no formal education in journalism and 75% no industry experience prior to being employed as a journalist, it is probable that they do not have any training in media law. This should be of concern, particularly given the fact that 87% of esports journalists have some responsibility for producing PR content as well as journalism. The potential issues that come with having to service commercial needs as well as editorial can be damaging both for a publisher and for an individual’s professional career. More research is needed about the level of qualifications and training given to esports journalists.

The lack of training in journalism could also impact on what is perceived by the esports journalists as acceptable working conditions and rates of pay, which make a career as an esports journalist viable or not. The data gathered from the esports journalists shows that both pay and lack of staff contracts are considered as barriers to entry to the profession for esports. While the esports journalists were not asked directly about how much they earned, 60% referenced low salaries and the scarcity of full-time, staff positions. One of the key differences identified between working for an endemic esports publication compared to a mainstream news provider was the lack of adherence to a standard rate of pay, within the industry. Freelance esports journalist, Stubbs (2020), explains how the low rates of pay that seem to be accepted within the industry, are making a career as an esports journalist unviable:

If it wasn't for me working for mainstream outlets which pay proper journalists’ rates, then I wouldn't be able to do this fulltime. I don't think there's any esports endemic sites that pay comparable to what any other writing industry does. So, the money is generally terrible unless you're working for, outside of esports, specialists' sites. There's no standard rate. I mean, I've been offered, $5 for 1,000 words before (Stubbs, Interview, 22/07/20).

The standard rates of pay for journalists in the UK are monitored by the unions and the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) publishes a Fees guide annually with rates per 1000 words[[17]](#footnote-18). The guide is based on average fees paid for written news and features, photography, and broadcast elements such as video and audio packages. There is noticeably no reference in the guide to any esports publishers. The sector is not represented at all. Interestingly the only piece of content listed by a publisher which is in the area of esports pays very poor rates. For a 2,000-word feature written for the gamer network *Eurogamer*, the fee the journalist received for this piece of work was £60. While this is not esports per se, it is about gaming, and if compared to the rates paid for a sports news piece in the *I* newspaper: £260 for 700 words or for a feature in the *Times*: £800 for 700 words, it does seem to corroborate the findings from this study that point to low pay for the sector. Why there is such a difference in pay rates is not clear.

Cross referencing the size of audience of each publisher suggests that pay is not correlated to the size of the audience. The *Times* newspaper has a monthly unique online audience of 36.8 million, the Eurogamer, 13.3 million.[[18]](#footnote-19) This difference of 36% doesn’t account for the difference between pay rates. The pay for the piece of content on Eurogamer was 92.5% lower than for the *Times*. Given the global size of the esports sector is predicted to pass 500 million by the end of 2022, (Newzoo 2022), it is surprising that esports does not register anywhere on the NUJ site. Additionally, the fact that esports content is not represented in any way in the NUJ’s Fees guide, which is dependent on journalists submitting what they have been paid for commissions, suggests that esports journalists are not engaging with the NUJ.

The absence of any reference to the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) or the British Association of Journalists (BAJ) in terms of standard rates of pay and/or contracts of employment was noted among the interviewed esports journalists. In the United Kingdom, journalism students commonly apply for a press pass as a crucial step in their transition from being a student to becoming a professional. This application process is usually facilitated through the NUJ or the BAJ, and the attainment of a press pass is typically synonymous with membership in either union. Given that the majority (62.5%) of esports journalists lack formal journalism training, it is likely that union membership is not a prevalent practice among this group.

**Key Finding: (2) Esports journalists don’t identify as journalists**

Only 25% of the esports journalists interviewed referred to themselves as journalists; 75% opting for the term writer or editor instead. The lack of reference to the terms journalist and journalism was also absent in the language used to describe working practice. Editor for the *esports Insider*, Adam Fitch describes his role as managing a team of ‘writers’. He does not refer to them as journalists. Instead, what is referenced frequently during the interviews are the terms blogger and blogging. 75% of the esports journalists interviewed use these terms to describe their background into the profession. This is significant because it may signal another reason why there was a lack of referencing of either union by the esports journalists. Both the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) and the British Association of Journalists (BAJ) orientate to the mainstream news organisations and it is only in the past 20 years that there have been changes made to open up to those journalists working online and to those working for trade and consumer publications. The BAJ does ‘not issue UK press cards to vloggers or bloggers’. This indicates that there is still a division between traditional journalism and newer genres. Bloggers were also discounted from the Reuters report which sought to capture the landscape of journalism in the UK in 2016. (Newman, 2016). With many esports journalists identifying as having come from a background in blogging, they may feel that they are framed as non-journalists and the unions therefore, not relevant to them.

**Key Finding: (3) Esports journalism is dependent on press releases**

The data shows a climate of freelancers producing content for low wages which is resulting in a reliance on press releases and a lack of investigative reporting within esports. Findings point to a concentration of esports content on game releases, promotions of exhibitions/gaming conventions or the details for when and where competitive events are going to happen, rather than investigative, original reporting, with much of the content driven by official press releases from game publishers or tournament organisers. The reasons for this are complex.

Firstly, not having a salaried position as a journalist has a direct impact on the types of stories produced. The global nature of esports means being able to travel is imperative in order to build contacts by covering events and meeting people in person. Low pay is a barrier to this and forces a reliance on officially released information through press releases to create content. Freelance journalist Stubbs (2020) articulates how the issues of low pay prevent the opportunity to build the contacts necessary to report industry stories effectively:

[it’s] not just being paid to survive, but also having the money to get to events. Access remotely is, is quite difficult to get if you're not, necessarily top tier. If you haven't been around for years and have got the contacts to email, then who trusts you? If you're not in that elite group, then unfortunately, getting access to the players who ultimately the entire industry is driven around, they are where the stories are (Stubbs, Interview, 22/07/20).

It is clear for Stubbs that not having the budget to travel is a barrier to building the contacts necessary to pursue investigative stories.

Secondly, the working practices that are specific to esports journalists is another factor in making interacting with copy from press releases much more intrinsic to the output. Journalists working for endemic esports publications are not only producing news, they are part of the team responsible for delivering a marketing strategy. 87% of the esports journalists interviewed included some element of public relations when describing their role. This includes creating and executing marketing campaigns, producing sponsored editorial and participating in the organisation and running of corporate events. The relationship between editorial and commercial is contentious and is not an issue exclusive to esports. Lewis et al found between 2006 and 2007, 60% of press stories published newspapers in the UK were wholly or mainly reliant on press releases. (Lewis et al., 2008)

The findings from this study do not allude simply to press releases being used by journalists to write stories. The esports journalists interviewed for this study are themselves part of the process of generating and distributing the press releases. UK editor for *Dexerto*, Patterson (2020) describes aspects of his role which have more resonance for public relations than journalism: “The other stuff I do is with social media, so making sure that we’re presenting ourselves on Twitter and Facebook, YouTube … the way we want to. And then also campaigns … I do a lot of campaign stuff, making sure that if we’ve got sponsored articles or, sponsored social posts, and all these kind of things” (Patterson, Interview, 04/12/20).

The editor for the *esports Insider*, Fitch (2020) articulates how he has to manage the cross over between editorial and commercial and the relationship between the interests of the publisher and equally the writer – note the term journalist is not used: “I work with writers to come up with ideas, as well as taking pictures and trying to develop them … ensuring that it’s the best for both parties, both (the publication) and the writer Then there’s a little bit on events, when it comes to like events promo, and like writing our PRs and announcements” (Fitch, Interview, 08/07/20). Journalists working for an ‘independent’ esports publication are expected to toe a corporate line through producing sponsored editorials and looking after a client relationship through marketing campaigns. This blurring of editorial and commercial within the roles compounds the issues around low pay resulting in not having independent, investigative reporting within the sector.

Journalism and marketing are uneasy bedfellows and ultimately manifests in the sector promoting itself “as this kind of golden egg … inflated in terms of valuations” (Ashton, Interview, 10/07/20). This climate of self-promotion has led to questions over the credibility of the sector particularly where reported statistics are concerned. Furthermore, according to Diffusion of Innovation Theory (Rogers, 2003) publishing credible data through independent reporting is key to the future sustainability of esports. Mobile payment systems, cloud computing services, telemedicine, and artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning provide examples of technology innovations where the role of credible data and independent reporting has been essential for their adoption and sustainability. Rogers (2003) emphasises that the dissemination of accurate information and unbiased reporting on the benefits, security, and potential applications of these technologies is crucial for fostering trust and acceptance among users and organisations, leading to their widespread adoption and growth.

The esports journalists interviewed for this study recognise that there is a need for more investigative reporting within esports (Ashton, Interview, 10/07/20). Patterson (2020) warned of potential corruption within the industry that just isn’t being reported on:

A lot of esports journalism now is just copy-and-paste press releases. And, as we know, press releases are generally just PR …which is fine, and I don’t think there’s any problem with esports journalism being positive about esports …But I think that there’s a lot of friendships going on that lead to some bad stuff … some shady stuff going on that doesn’t get addressed (Patterson, Interview, 04/12/20)

Without the resources for independent reporting, there is little to challenge the stories created from press releases that Patterson complains makes up a majority of esports journalism in the UK currently.

Monetising content is cited as an additional reason for the reliance on press releases and the dual nature of the roles described by the interviewees of this study. Esports publications are facing the same problems of mainstream media. How do you make content pay? The data suggests that in esports the platforms able to afford to employ journalists, do so through combining commercial and editorial endeavours. Additionally, many of the publishers of esports content currently are publishers who have something else to ‘peddle’. Freelance journalist Stubbs (2020) explains:

So, the big thing over the last ten years has been the industry going from nothing to, kind of, a very big, big side of it. Unfortunately, the money is still not great. And for anyone involved, no one's really figured out how, how to monetise it, which is a problem. And that's why if you look at the big names in it (producers of esports content), they're all in it for a different reason other than money. You look at ESPN, they're in it for media rights battles. You look at Red Bull who do a lot of content, their entire esports output is marketing to sell their energy drink. (Stubbs, Interview, 22/07/20)

Without the revenue generated by sponsorship, or marketing, the possibility for publishing esports content is compromised as the example from Stubbs illustrates. Another example which serves to illustrate this point is the first esports journalist to be employed by a mainstream newspaper in 2018 was engaged as a commercial features journalist, his position only viable because it was paid for by a sponsor. The esports page that evolved was only possible because of the fee for the sponsored editorial. When the deal between the sponsor (GAME) and the publisher (the *Mail)* was not renewed, neither was the contract for the esports journalist. The esports section closed.

**Key Finding: (4) Esports journalists have less freedom to report than mainstream journalists**

The esports press does not enjoy the same amount of freedom to report as the mainstream press and there is an inherent opacity in the sector that makes independent reporting difficult. Esports journalists interviewed for this study cite the role of the game publishers in the esports ecosystem as the key reason for this. As game publishers own the games, the licences for tournaments, for media rights, and in some circumstances esports teams, the news released about a game/tournament/team, is often from the same source: the game publishers. As a result, there is a lack of independent reporting within esports (Black, Interview, 10/04/19). Additionally, because esports competitions are largely run by private companies, there isn't the same freedom given to the press as in traditional sport. All esports journalists interviewed for this study reported working under a constant threat of being blocked from attending events by the game companies for publishing content that is negative or for not abiding by strict rules about what is and what isn’t allowed.

Organised press conferences are much less regular than in traditional sports, and the esports journalists described difficulties in accessing players for reactions after an event. When there is availability to interview the players there are rules about what you can do. This manifests in very rigid approaches to reporting. Esports journalists attending tournaments are not afforded access to “grab a player and talk to them in the same way you can in other sports, everything has to be pre-arranged” (Ashton, Interview, 10/07/20). There is nothing spontaneous allowed and because these events are privately run and there is no industry-wide regulation for game publishers or ombudsman overseeing the sector, if a journalist does go against the Agreement they face a ban.

The acknowledgement from the esports journalists for this to be accepted as common practice suggests there is not the same adherence to (or knowledge of) codes of conduct or editorial guidelines, as in mainstream journalism, nor is there the expectation that journalists are afforded a special role to allow for free reporting, a foundational element of a democratic society and a fundamental responsibility of a journalist in the western world. It is noticeable that the only reference to an editorial code of practice was by one of the three esports journalists interviewed to have graduated with a degree in Journalism lending further evidence to support an argument for formal training in journalism. The lack thereof resulting in esports journalists being controlled in a way mainstream journalists aren’t. Ashton (2020) describes a working environment commonplace among the esports journalists interviewed for this study:

Publishers have refused to take questions from journalists because they didn’t like the fact that they leaked information, or they wrote something negative about them. And they’ve barred certain journalists from attending their events for whatever reason. And this, I feel, means that esports journalism is very much behind sports journalism with the type of stories we can write …There’s a lot of companies, that are borderline, not criminal, just kind of frowned upon, using tax havens and so on, but there’s a lot more that’s just outright criminal that a lot of people don’t know about and there’s that feeling that if you were to report on it, you could only really do it the one time, because you would be blocked from reporting on anything else (Ashton, Interview, 10/07/20).

With political journalists being banned from press conferences in the US under the Trump administration (Borchers, 2017; Stelter, 2018; Barnes, 2018) and following on more recently in the UK under former Prime Minister Johnson (Mason and Sparrow, 2020; O’Donoghue, 2020; Di Stefano, 2020), arguably the environment Ashton describes concerning the working practices for esports journalists is a reflection of where mainstream journalism is heading, a line of thought explored in Chapter 7.

**Key Finding: (5) Esports media mistrusts mainstream media**

The esports journalists interviewed for this study are wary of trusting mainstream media to cover the sector fairly and accurately. 80% pinpointed the BBC as the main culprit for misrepresenting the sector. Editor of the *esports Insider,* Fitch (2020), articulates what was a consensus amongst the esports journalists: “The BBC only want to use esports when they can, not attack it, but paint it in a bad light, as part of a larger narrative with gaming. And because of that mistreatment over the past 10 or 15 years from say the BBC, which is just the biggest example I can think of, the most prominent one, we’re (esports journalists) not very trusting” (Fitch, Interview, 08/07/20).

All esports journalists articulated the same mistrust of mainstream media, not just levelled at the BBC, but across all broadcasters and newspapers. The most consistent complaint was the continual inaccuracies in the copy and the misspelling of the word esports. UK editor for Dexterto, Patterson (2020) describes situations where mainstream newspapers and broadcasters have misspelled people’s names, position stories with unusual angles, make factual inaccuracies and randomly spell the word esports:

I have seen articles run on mainstream publications about esports that are either incredibly wrong, or just don’t really get it. And they position angles weirdly, and they’ll lead with the wrong thing. And, they’ll just, literally, misspell people’s names, and just show a kind of disregard for getting it right. Some really major publishers such as the BBC, still write the word esports with random spellings. You know, one article will say eSports, and then another will do Esports. It’s an issue that shows they don’t really care that much about getting it spot on. I mean, there’s no disagreement among esports journalists. I’ve never seen an esports-endemic website write esports any other way than it’s done, so it doesn’t make sense (Patterson, Interview, 04/12/20)

The issue with misspelling the word esports is a key indicator of the lack of understanding and familiarity of the sector (Chaloner, 2020). For industry, errors with terminology immediately calls into question the credibility of the copy.

**5.4: Esports titles and tournaments: *FIFA* and the ‘ePremier League’**

This section presents findings which show how an esports tournament is organised, in this case the ‘ePremier League’, can have impact on coverage by mainstream media. The findings demonstrate the Premier League did not consider the role of mainstream media in the launch of the ‘ePremier League’ and consequentially the League did not receive the coverage it needed in order for it to meet its goal of building a bridge between football fans and the esports community. The ‘ePremier League’ was not of interest to publishers in either of the live Finals analysed for this study. This is evidenced by a lack of content before, during and after each Final. The data reveals that despite Premier League clubs showing interest in the area of esports the clubs were not engaged with the ‘ePremier League’.

There are three key findings: (1) football clubs want to engage with esports but not the ‘ePremier League’, (2) the Premier League did not consider the role of mainstream media, (3) the design of an esports title/event impacts mainstream media coverage.

**Key Finding: (1) Football clubs want to engage with esports but not the ‘ePremier League’**

The data shows that as well as lack of engagement with mainstream media, the ‘ePL’ was not of interest to the ‘Premier League’ clubs either. In 2019 only 25% of the Clubs streamed the Finals in 2019, and 35% in 2021. There were just 11 articles in total on the live Finals of 2019 across nine Clubs and only nine articles across six Clubs in 2021. And as with mainstream media coverage, in terms of content published, the live Finals failed to show any growth from 2019 to 2021. The table below (Fig.5.10) shows the number of articles specifically covering the ‘ePremier League’ Finals on each Club site.

*Source: Filotrani, 2021*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| FINALS 2019 | | | | FINALS 2021 | | | |
| Manchester United | 0 | Southampton | 0 | Manchester United | 0 | Southampton | 1 |
| Manchester City | 0 | Bournemouth | 2 | Manchester City | 0 | Sheffield United | 1 |
| Chelsea | 0 | Crystal Palace | 0 | Chelsea | 0 | Crystal Palace | 0 |
| Arsenal | 0 | Newcastle United | 0 | Arsenal | 0 | Newcastle United | 0 |
| Tottenham Hotspur | 0 | Burnley | 0 | Tottenham Hotspur | 0 | Burnley | 0 |
| Everton | 1 | Fulham | 0 | Everton | 4 | Fulham | 0 |
| Wolv. Wanderers | 2 | Cardiff City | 0 | Wolv. Wanderers | 1 | West Bromwich A | 0 |
| Huddersfield Town | 1 | Brighton & Hove A | 0 | Leeds United | 2 | Brighton & Hove A | 1 |
| Leicester City | 0 | Watford | 1 | Leicester City | 0 | Aston Villa | 1 |
| Liverpool | 0 | West Ham United | 3 | Liverpool | 0 | West Ham United | 1 |

Fig.5.10. Premier League Club engagement with the ‘ePremier League’ Finals

The Clubs in green are the clubs which showed the live stream of the Finals on their Club websites and the numbers correspond to the total number of articles covering the tournament published during the days of the ePl finals.

Searching for content on the ‘ePL’ on the Premier League websites revealed an interest in esports but not with the ‘ePremier League’. Newcastle United, for example, has 16 articles on *FIFA* *Series* but only three on the ‘ePremier League’ and as the table above demonstrates, no content at all covering either Finals. Equally, Burnley has 24 articles on esports covering both 2019 and 2020 seasons of the ‘ePremier League’, it has no content at all on 2021, and nothing published during the live streams of the Finals. Burnley’s aspirations in esports is evidenced by the Club sponsorship of 10 professional esports players and a partnership with a local Further Education college offering esports qualifications. Similarly, Aston Villa has its own esports platform called Villa Gaming as part of its strategy to increase its fan base to support Premier League initiatives such as the ‘ePremier League’ but there is no evidence of this being implemented. What this tells us is that there is an appetite for football clubs to connect with esports but not with the ‘ePremier League’ and specifically not with the live Finals.

**Key Finding: (2) The ‘Premier League’ did not consider the role of mainstream media**

Diagram

Description automatically generatedThe reason why ‘Premier League’ clubs weren’t more engaged with the ‘ePremier League’ could be because the ‘Premier League’ did not consider the role of mainstream media and therefore did not receive the coverage it needed in order to achieve its ambition of connecting clubs with esports through the game of *FIFA*. This is evidenced by the minimal role that SKY Sports played despite being billed as the main media partner for the tournament. There is no indication anywhere, at any point of the tournament that SKY Sports was involved. What was announced as a partnership between the ‘Premier League’, EA Sports and SKY Sports, was actually a partnership between the ‘Premier League’, EA Sports and Gfinity Studios, and contrary to my assumption that as the main media partner for the tournament, SKY Sports would be responsible for producing the live Finals, the broadcaster had no involvement in the production at all. Gfinity Studios was both the venue for the live Finals and the production company which produced the programmes for the live streams. The chart below (Fig.5.11) highlights what was announced compared with what was actioned in reality.

The Reality

As announced

Fig.5.11. Key Stakeholders ‘ePremier League’

Not only is there scant content by the broadcaster covering the tournament, but there is also a conspicuous lack of branding. In a closed distribution list document[[19]](#footnote-20) handed out to each Club containing the rules and regulations for Club participation in the ‘ePremier League’, The Premier League promised to provide the Clubs with a “clean live feed” of the Finals “to share across Club social media or digital channels at Club discretion on a free of charge basis to fans.” (Premier League, 2018a). This explains the lack of branding of Sky Sports during the Finals. As has already been noted, only 25% of the Premier League clubs in 2019 and 35% in 2021 live streamed the Finals on their Club sites (see Fig.5.10, p.144). It is probable that having SKY Sports branding on the feed would have lent credibility to the tournament and that by stripping the feed of any branding by SKY Sports, the benefits of being associated with an experienced and well-known sports television production company were also taken away. Had SKY Sports been more visibly associated with the League it is possible this level of engagement with the Clubs would have been higher, and more than highlights of the Finals on SKY Sports would have been shown.

The live streams of the Finals in 2019 and 2021 had no signposting for the audience of where to watch and at what time matches were to be played. Consequentially, there was no way of planning a day’s viewing, or of being able to follow a particular player. Instead, it seems as if the expectation was that a viewer would be continuously watching the live stream from the opening to the closing of the tournament. This meant 11 hours on Day 1 in 2019 and another 11 hours on Day 2, with no scheduled breaks at all. Changes to the way the Finals in 2021 were organised addressed some of these issues. In 2021 the tournament was run over three days instead of two and therefore the hours of live streaming were reduced to six hours on Days 1 and 2 and four hours on Day 3, and there was the introduction of scheduled breaks. However, there was still no signposting of when and where the stream could be watched and what time the matches were scheduled for. The lack of scheduling meant the viewing experience was left to chance and with no timings attached to when players representing their clubs were due to play against each other, it is unsurprising that so few clubs streamed the matches on their sites to their football fans.

The company responsible for the production of the live Finals, Gfinity is an experienced esports production company, so the lack of scheduling is surprising. A possible reason for this is that the production company wasn’t responsible for the distribution of the content. As the owners of the tournament, the ‘Premier League’ (PL) was responsible for the structure and the engagement of the Clubs. Gfinity Studios was engaged to supply the venue and the broadcasting expertise to produce the live stream but not to be responsible for engaging the audience. What this dynamic reveals, is a disconnect that doesn’t exist in sports broadcasts. For a live football match covered by SKY Sports for example, the responsibility of the technical expertise of the broadcast and the production of the programme, is matched by the distribution of that content to SKY Sports’ audience. A television broadcaster for a live sporting event has the audience central to its programming. This was not the case for the ‘ePremier League’.

SKY Sports’ minimal role in the League left a gap between the content that was broadcast and the distribution of that content. Gfinity was not producing content for its own audience. The production company had no responsibility for getting the content to an audience. And while the ‘Premier League’ has the relationship with all the ‘Premier League’ Clubs, the data shows it did not focus on Twitch as a platform (Fig.5.14. p.155), nor the esports space, and not being a broadcaster, had little input in the structure of the stream. What we are left with is a sports organisation creating an esports tournament, employing an esports company as producer but having no strategy for distribution or of how to connect the esports community with sports fans. Ultimately what the data shows is that it isn’t enough just to create a live stream of people playing an esports title. The audience needs to be actively engaged. This is where arguably mainstream media’s involvement, through SKY Sports, would have made a difference.

At the launch of the League the ambition to connect Premier League clubs with *FIFA* fans was clearly stated by the Chief Executive Richard Masters in a press release: “We know millions of people play *FIFA*. This new esports competition will provide our clubs with an exciting opportunity to engage with them” (EA Sports, 2018). But, with patchy content coverage by the clubs of the tournament, and with the data showing more than 70% of them not streaming either Final, it is unclear how the ‘Premier League’ hoped to achieve this ambition without the support of mainstream media coverage. It is perhaps both an indicator of how little understanding of the esports sector the ‘Premier League’ had before launching this tournament and the necessity for considering the role of mainstream media when organising an esports tournament.

**Key Finding: (3) Structure of esports tournaments impacts mainstream media coverage**

The data demonstrates that the structure and the timeframe of esports tournaments can have an impact on how likely or not they are to be covered by mainstream media. The structure of the ‘ePremier League’ caused issues because although described as the digital equivalent to the ‘Premier League’, the ‘ePremier League’ follows a ‘World Cup’ in structure. The ‘Premier League’ is played out over nine months, the ‘ePL’ over 3 months, the ‘Premier League’ is won or lost by points, the ‘ePL’ by knockout rounds, the same as a ‘World Cup’. Why this is significant is that the form of competition dictates a different approach to broadcasting.

For the ‘Premier League’ coverage is one match at a time. For the ‘ePremier League’, after the preliminary qualifying rounds, all matches were played over a few days, with the majority being played concurrently, making planning for the broadcast particularly complex. This is an additional reason why clear scheduling was so important. As well as games being played concurrently esports games are not played in contained 90-minute matches as in football. Typically, games that are played in tournaments run continuously and often over a number of days, making the approach to broadcasting very different to that of a sports broadcast which, typically, focuses on one match at a time, within a standardised time frame.

Why this is important to note is because it may indicate a reason as to why mainstream media wasn’t more responsive in covering the tournament. Esports tournaments as they are currently organised are not packaged in a format that translates well on to more traditional media distributors such as television. Having a continuous stream with continuous play makes the content difficult to broadcast. A point raised as a barrier to esports being covered by mainstream media by the industry experts. Black intimates the way in which esports tournaments are set up is a fundamental problem that mainstream television broadcasters have raised when it comes to covering esports tournaments (Black 2019).

The issue centres around broadcasters having to stick to rigid frameworks for television programming and so there are questions about how to align continuous play tournaments with existing sports coverage, which are clearly segmented to allow for features such as advertisements. How can a broadcaster reorganise the games to allow for commercial stations to run adverts? Black (2019) describes a common reaction from a mainstream broadcaster expressing interest in covering an esports tournament:

When the traditional media companies are interested in buying the rights for the stuff that we're producing, they're saying we have to stick to our OFCOM regs but can you change the game so that it can fit into their framework. When the answer is no, that's not how the game works - you just can't change, they respond with … we probably won't take it then (Black, Interview, 10/04/19).

Rights Black references include rules governing sponsorship and product placement within programmes and the amount of advertising allowed per hour of broadcast, rules which are currently under review through a public consultation period due to complete at the end of 2022. This action by Ofcom is firstly in response to the diversification of the audience in terms of viewing habits and secondly the correlation with a decline in generated revenue from advertising income.

An analysis of the opening 45 mins of the ‘ePremier League’ Finals programmes in 2019 and 2021 demonstrated a change in packaging for the programmes suggest an attempt to make the content more standardised and more able to accommodate advertising. Not only was there a streamlining of segments (Appendix C) but there was also the introduction of scheduled breaks. These breaks see the Finals in 2021 follow a recognisable commercial television channel format of 10/15 mins of programme, followed by 3/4 min scheduled breaks (OFCOM regulations determine 9 mins maximum per hour of a broadcast currently can be advertising, with a maximum of 3:50mins per break). It is a distinct difference in approach to 2019 where there were no scheduled breaks during the continuous live stream. With the programme packaged in this way, it becomes more transmissible on television, though as the data shows the programme was not shown on any linear television channel.

What is noticeable about the scheduled breaks is the lack of advertising. Instead, a static splash screen instructing the audience that the Finals would ‘be back shortly’ was displayed. This provokes questions about the focus of the broadcast. Who was it produced for? With no scheduling signposting play and the gaps in the content, the viewer does not seem to have been forefront in the planning of broadcast by the Premier League. This is evidenced by the low viewership across both YouTube and Twitch (Figs.5.12/13). Additionally, there was no interaction or reaction to any conversations in the chatbox (the Internet Relay Chat or IRC[[20]](#footnote-21)) on either YouTube or Twitch, by SKY Sports, EA Sports or any of the contributors to the programme. Nor was there any reference to the community during the programme by the hosts. Comments from the community in the chatbox, for example, concerning spikes in traffic for no apparent reason were not acknowledged, further demonstrating a disconnect between the community and programme covering the Finals on the live stream.

**5.5: Platforms of distribution: Twitch and YouTube**

This section presents findings which demonstrate that the lack of mainstream media coverage, the poor signposting of when and where to watch, and the confusing structure of the programmes resulted in low viewer numbers for the live Finals of the ‘ePremier League’ in both 2019 and in 2021. By analysing the viewer numbers on YouTube and Twitch for this tournament, a key issue was highlighted regarding the credibility of published statistics around viewership of esports events. The data shows a discrepancy between my data gathered from recording the viewer numbers concurrently every 30 minutes of the live streams, and the official data showing daily totals of viewer numbers as published by the two platforms which streamed the content, YouTube and Twitch. Comparing these two data sets shows a significant variance. Additionally, analysing the pattern of viewer numbers in my recorded data, shows unexplained spikes in traffic during the live streams. These factors cause doubt in the metrics used to report on the success or failure of esports tournaments. Notwithstanding the credibility of the numbers, the data does demonstrate a significant difference in market share between YouTube and Twitch in esports content and it also suggests that the two platforms are servicing different audiences and performing different functions.

There are four key findings: (1) the ‘ePremier League’ Finals lacked viewers, (2) metrics for viewer engagement are not reliable, (3) Twitch outperforms YouTube for esports live streams, (4) football fans are located on YouTube.

**Key Finding: (1) The ‘ePremier League’ Finals lacked viewers**

The decline in the number of publishers covering the Finals is matched by a decline in the numbers of viewers recorded watching the live streams. Low viewer numbers together with a decline in audience across both YouTube and Twitch suggest the tournament was not of interest to esports viewers. There are two sets of data used to qualify this statement, one which is primary data and shows concurrent viewers recorded at the time of the live streams and then the second set which is the official data released by Twitch and YouTube, and shows the total number of viewers as published at the end of each live stream. The data shows that despite there being more channels available to watch the live Finals in 2021, the pattern of viewer numbers did not show an increase. In 2019 SKY Sports only streamed on YouTube, and EA Sports on Twitch. In 2021, SKY Sports streamed across both platforms and the Premier League also streamed the Finals live on YouTube. Even accounting for the extra channels the data shows a 40% drop in concurrent viewers from 2019 to 2021.

In 2019 Twitch viewers on the EA Sports *FIFA* channel ranged from 8k to a peak of just under 70k. On YouTube, viewers on the SKY Sports channel ranged from just under 500 to a peak of just over 6k (under the bottom range of Twitch). In 2021 the numbers are even lower. Twitch viewers on the EA Sports *FIFA* channel ranged from 650 to a peak 15,971. On SKY Sports YouTube channel, viewers ranged from 782 to a peak of 7,419. On SKY Sport’s Twitch channel, the viewers ranged from 16 to a peak of 164. And finally, the Premier League’s YouTube channel had viewers ranging from 345 to a peak of 2,499. At 9pm in 2019, the grand final drew in 22,952 concurrent viewers on EA Sports compared with 13,925 viewers at the same time in 2021. The two tables below (Figs.5.12/13) show the difference in numbers of viewers that I recorded every 30 mins during the live stream of the Finals. Fig.5.12 is the viewer numbers for 2019 and Fig.13 is the viewer numbers for 2021. I started recording the numbers from 2pm till the end of the live stream each day.

Table

Description automatically generated

Source: Filotrani, 2021

Table

Description automatically generatedFig.5.12. Viewers 2019

Source: Filotrani, 2021

Fig.5.13. Viewers 2021

**Key Finding: (2) Metrics for esports viewer engagement are not reliable**

While my collected data shows a drop of 40% in concurrent viewers between 2019 and 2021, the data from the officially released total viewer numbers, shows that from the Finals in 2019 to the Finals in 2021, there was a 99% drop in audience. The total viewers of the Finals in 2019, was 54,477,345*.* Comparatively, the total viewers of the Finals in 2021 was 497,180. This data tells us that the tournament as measured by engagement with the live Finals did not grow exponentially in terms of viewers, instead it declined significantly.

The table below (Fig.5.14) shows the officially published data regarding viewer numbers on both YouTube and Twitch. It is worth pointing out that these totals are the combined numbers officially published by Twitch (and by YouTube) for viewers each day as soon as the live stream had finished. There is no breakdown given about whether these are unique viewers or where the viewers have been watching the stream from.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Platforms/ channels | Qualifier days | | | Final day - Knockout/ tournament final | | Total viewers  across all days | |
|  | 2019 | 2021 | | 2019 | 2021 | 2019 | 2021 |
| Twitch  EA Sports | 29,278,740 | 65,685 | 56,404 | 24,915,309 | 144,700 | 54,194,049 | 266,789 |
| Twitch  Sky Sports |  | 545 | 302 |  | 1,350 |  | 2,197 |
| YouTube  SKY Sports | 187,467 | 52,062 | 37,867 | 95,829 | 52,564 | 283,296 | 142,493 |
| YouTube Premier League |  | 33,279 | 31,794 |  | 20,628 |  | 85,701 |

Source: Filotrani, 2021

Fig.5.14. Official viewer numbers Twitch and YouTube

There is a huge variance in numbers over the concurrent viewers as recorded by me every 30 minutes during the live stream and the total numbers of views as published by the platforms. Taking Twitch and EA Sports channel by way of illustration, adding up the total numbers of concurrent viewers in 2019 for Day 1, is 537,053*.* Comparatively, the number published by Twitch when the stream ended at 10pm on Day 1, was 29,278,740. The actual concurrent viewers on EA Sports Twitch channel as recorded therefore accounts for less than 2% of the official total as published by Twitch – and this percentage is probably artificially inflated by using the sum of viewer numbers every 30 minutes because calculating the daily total by adding viewers at intervals of 30 minutes doesn’t discriminate between unique viewers. Instead, the same group of people counted as viewers in the first 30 minutes of the live stream theoretically could be the same group of people in the final 30 minutes. Alternatively, the numbers recorded every 30 minutes could indicate new viewers.

The discrepancy between the concurrent viewers recorded every 30 minutes and the total number of views published by the YouTube and Twitch highlights the challenge of accurately measuring viewer engagement and viewership on live streaming platforms. The large difference between these two metrics could be attributed to several factors. Concurrent viewers represent the number of people watching the stream at the same time as stated. This metric is a snapshot of the viewership at specific moments during the live stream. The sum of concurrent viewers every 30 minutes is an estimate and may not be a perfect representation of the total viewership, as it does not account for unique viewers who join or leave the stream at different times. On the other hand, the total number of views published by Twitch and YouTube represents the cumulative number of views during the entire live stream, which can include repeat views and viewers who join or leave the stream multiple times. This metric provides a more comprehensive picture of the overall viewership but may not accurately reflect unique viewers.

The discrepancy between the two metrics could also be due to how Twitch and YouTube count viewers: whether the count is based on the number of times the stream is loaded, in contrast to counting views only after a certain period of watching the stream. This information is not publicly available. Additionally, the numbers may also include views from embedded players on other websites or social media platforms, or adverts which can contribute to the difference in numbers. On Twitch for example there is a carousel which streamers can use to promote their streams. This paid for advertisement slot sits at the top of a channel playing selected content. As this research did not look at advertising on either Twitch or Youtube no assertions can be made about what percentage of the overall views advertising may have accounted for. But what needs to be noted is that this again is information not made available by Twitch or YouTube. What is highlighted therefore by my data collection compared with the officially published stats is the complexity of accurately measuring viewership on live streaming platforms and it underlines the necessity to consider the limitations of these metrics when analysing engagement and viewership data.

With the caveat then that the total of 537,053 daily viewers is an estimation of the total concurrent viewers as recorded during the live stream on Day 1 in 2019, who or what makes up the other 88% of the total viewer numbers as published by Twitch once the stream had ended? And how has this number been calculated? As the viewers were clearly not watching the stream on the EA Sports channel, as evidenced by the data, they must have been watching on an embedded stream on a third-party site. But which sites, and how is this to be verified? As the data demonstrates, only five ‘Premier League’ Clubs streamed the Finals live in 2019 (Fig.5.10. p.144), so it is safe to assume the viewer numbers are not accounted by the Premier League clubs. The question is therefore, where are the remaining 29,278,740 Twitch viewers accessing the stream from? What is worth noting is on the ‘Premier League’ Club sites that showed the live stream of the Finals, there are no stats showing the number of viewers and therefore there is no way of cross-checking against the total viewers as published by Twitch for the EA Sports live stream. How the total viewer numbers on Twitch are arrived at is unclear. Neither Twitch nor YouTube provide a detailed breakdown of viewership statistics, such as demographics or the specific time users joined or left the stream. What they offer, overall viewership numbers, average watch time, and peak concurrent viewers, does not provide granular insight into viewer numbers. This limited data availability can make it difficult to either verify what the numbers mean or draw any meaningful conclusions about viewers and their preferences or engagement patterns.

An additional observation that questions the validity of the viewer stats is revealed in analysing the pattern of viewing every 30 minutes. Peaks and troughs do not follow a consistent pattern and monitoring the streams on both YouTube and Twitch concurrently revealed no discernible reasons, at the time of viewing, to account for the rising and decreasing numbers, nor to account for why peaks occurred at different times on Twitch compared with YouTube, something commented on in the chatbox. For example, the peak of viewers in 2019 occurred on Day 1 at 4pm on Twitch but on YouTube the peak views occurred at the end of the stream at 10pm. On Day 2, the viewers peaked on Twitch at 6pm but on YouTube at 9pm. There did not seem to be any reason for these spikes in viewers nor a reason for the differences in times for each platform. And why then in 2021 did the peak viewers follow a more consistent pattern across the channels on all three days? On Day 1 the peak of viewers was recorded at 5pm on Twitch EA Sports and YouTube SKY Sports, while on Twitch Sky Sport, the peak was at the beginning of the stream at 2pm and on YouTube ‘Premier League’ at the end of the stream, at 8pm. On Day 2 all channels apart from Twitch Sky Sport recorded a peak viewership at 7pm and again on Day 3, the same channels all peaked at the end of the stream at 10pm. Twitch SKY Sport was the outlier, recording peaks on all days at the beginning of the streams.

Furthermore, on the grand final of the ‘ePremier League’ in 2019, which one would assume would draw the biggest audience, YouTube had a peak viewership at the beginning of the final match at 9pm but Twitch had less than half of its peak viewers recorded at this time. As the grand final progresses, the viewership begins to decline, with both platforms showing significantly less viewers at the end of the match than at the beginning. In 2021, this trend is reversed, and we see the peak of viewers across all channels (apart from Twitch SKY Sport) at the end of the grand final match. The viewers steadily increase from the beginning of the match at 9pm, culminating in the highest viewers as the match concludes and the stream goes off air. These inconsistencies, together with the data showing an extreme drop in viewers from 2019 to 2021 provokes questions around the veracity of the published numbers.

As already discussed in Chapter 3, there is no universally agreed metric or organisation responsible for measuring viewership for esports and the widespread use of viewerbots to artificially boost numbers has been documented (Swindlehurst, 2019). Instead of a governing body responsible for publishing market data, the sector depends on a combination of statistics released by game publishers and events companies which host tournaments, using bespoke algorithms for their own esports titles and events, tracker sites which calculate average viewership by hour and by minute of a live stream, by recording concurrent viewers, and a handful of market analyst sites which interpret this data, of which Newzoo is the market leader. But without the streaming platforms, YouTube and Twitch, in this case, providing a breakdown of where the viewer numbers are coming from, determining what counts as real viewers as in real people watching, is problematic. It is unsurprising therefore to hear from esports journalists, about concerns in industry over the metrics used to report on the success or failure of certain titles and the size of the online audience at tournament events. Journalist for *The Esports Observer*, Ashton (2020) identifies viewer stats coming from Chinese platforms as being particularly problematic: “I can outright say, if you hear anything ever to do with Chinese viewer stats, don’t believe it because even if you go onto a Chinese streaming platform, the number that it displays is not accurate and I’ve had that told to me by publishers as well… It’s just a different medium to television” (Ashton, Interview, 10/07/20).

The fact that a Twitch or YouTube stream can be embedded on a third-party site, or that the stream could be part of a promotion on another channel, appearing in an advert for example on an extraneous website page, makes tracking actual viewership very difficult. Ashton uses an example of the ‘*Overwatch* League’ to illustrate:

When you’re looking at that number saying there’s this many viewers on Twitch, there’s so many different aspects to it …This was something people caught out the Overwatch League for … when you open the game clients of Overwatch, the match will start playing. Well, that counts as a viewer but you’re not technically watching it. Or, on websites, there’ll be a Twitch embed that would start playing and that’s technically a view, but you’re just reading an article. You’re not actually watching it … A lot of times a company would come forward and say, we had a peak viewership of this many million, which is great, but, you know, that’s literally the point in which the most people are watching, which could just be the peak of the finals. It doesn’t mean any other part of your tournament was even close to that (Ashton, Interview, 10/07/20).

**Key Finding: (3) YouTube outperformed Twitch**

While the veracity of the numbers can be debated, analysing the hourly data of concurrent viewers of the Finals in 2019 and 2021 does give a good indication of the comparative size of the audience watching the stream live on those platforms and points to a market difference in Twitch and YouTube. What the data shows us is that Twitch outperformed YouTube in both 2019 and in 2021 for the live Finals. In 2019 on Day 1 of the Finals, the concurrent viewers on Twitch peaked at 60,066 compared with just 1,703 on YouTube. On Day 2, the numbers followed a similar pattern. On Twitch there was a peak viewership of 69,547 compared with 6,035 on YouTube. Across both days therefore, Twitch commanded 94% of the peak viewership in 2019 (See appendix D for a chart of both Finals). In 2021 we see an adjustment in this market share reflecting more channels streaming the Finals than in 2019. On Day 1, there was a peak viewership of 14,798 on Twitch and 1,937 on YouTube. On Day 2, there was a peak viewership of 13,402 on Twitch compared with 2,612 on YouTube and on the final day, Day 3, the peak of concurrent viewers on Twitch reached 16,135 compared with 9,917 on YouTube. Across the three days of the Final in 2021 therefore, Twitch again commanded the majority share of the peak audience (75%).

While the data shows that Twitch had a clear majority over YouTube in terms of the market share of audience for the live Finals of the ‘ePremier League’, when looking at data concerning the full 3-month season of the ‘ePremier League’ tournament instead of just the live Finals, YouTube outperforms Twitch. Running a search for ‘ePremier League’ *FIFA 21* content on each stream, YouTube outstrips Twitch for viewers by nearly 80%. The table below shows the total views published on each channel. On Twitch for the ‘ePremier League’ *FIFA* *21* season on channels SKY Sports and EA Sports *FIFA*, is 412,000. Total views published on YouTube for the ‘ePremier League’ *FIFA* *21* on channels Premier League and SKY Sports Football, is 1,447,531. Taken together this gives a total viewership for the season of 1,859,531.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Channels/Platforms | Channel created | Channel followers/  subscribers | ‘ePremier League’ *FIFA* 21 |
| SKY Sports  Twitch | Nov-15 | 13,052 | 5k |
| EA Sports *FIFA*  Twitch | Sep-11 | 1.9m | 407k |
| Premier League  YouTube | May-19 | 1.7m | 700,531 |
| SKY Sports Football  YouTube | Jul-15 | 2.91m | 747k |

*Source: Filotrani May 2021*

Fig.5.15. Twitch versus YouTube: total ‘ePremier League’ content (FIFA 21)

The data is correct as of May 2021 and was collectedusing a combination of socialblade for YouTube, twitchtracker for Twitch and manually searching on each platform.

The table (Fig.5.15) shows that Twitch accounts for just 22% of the total viewers for the ‘ePremier League’ *FIFA* *21* season demonstrating that the platforms have different functions and service different types of content. Compared with YouTube, Twitch commands the biggest share of an audience head-to-head during a live stream but when it comes to VOD content (video on demand – ie: content that is not live), YouTube is dominant. The difference in the platforms therefore is between live broadcasts and pre-recorded content. In this instance, Twitch being the platform for live broadcasts and YouTube for pre-records, as evidenced by the data for the live ‘ePremier League’ Finals, in both 2019 and 2021 and for the total viewership over both 3-month seasons.

The data also reveals a difference in profile for mainstream publisher SKY Sports. The size of the audience for SKY Sports is significantly higher on YouTube. The broadcaster has very little presence by comparison on Twitch. Given that the data shows the audience for the live stream of the Finals was greater on Twitch, the fact that SKY Sports recorded such low viewer numbers on its Twitch channel in 2021 (it didn’t show the 2019 Finals on this channel), shows a lack of focus by SKY Sports on the platform and consequentially the esports audience. The data from the analysis of the broadcast lends further support to this finding. Nowhere does SKY Sports signpost to its audience of where and when to watch the live stream on Twitch and looking at the number of subscribers it has on Twitch compared with its YouTube followers, 13,052 compared with 2.91m respectively which is less than 0.5% of its followers on the two platforms combined. The low viewer numbers for the live streams in 2021 on Twitch are unsurprising.

**Key Finding: (4) Football fans are located on YouTube**

It is worth pointing out that the Premier League clubs also have very little presence on Twitch. In 2021, 70% of the clubs did not have a Twitch account compared with 100% on YouTube. Liverpool FC for example had 5.6m subscribers on YouTube but no Twitch account. This indicates a lack of focus on Twitch as a platform for football clubs to engage with their fans in the UK and a concentration on YouTube. The table below (Fig.5.16) shows the active subscribers in 2021 for each Premier League Club on both platforms.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | | Premier League Clubs 2021 | YouTube subscribers | Twitch subscribers | | Liverpool | 5.6m | 0 | | Manchester United | 3.9m | 0 | | Manchester City | 3.2m | 2,800 | | Chelsea | 2.7m | 0 | | Arsenal | 2.5m | 0 | | Tottenham Hotspur | 1.7m | 21k | | Everton | 498K | 0 | | Wolverhampton Wanderers | 481k | 0 | | Leicester City | 324k | 0 | | Leeds United | 225k | 1,800 | | West Ham United | 217k | 0 | | Southampton | 145k | 441 | | Sheffield United | 134k | 556k | | Crystal Palace | 121k | 0 | | Newcastle United | 117k | 0 | | Burnley | 62k | 551 | | Fulham | 45k | 0 | | West Bromwich Albion | 34k | 0 | | Aston Villa | 2,120 | 0 | | Brighton & Hove Albion | No figures published | 0 |   *data correct as of May 2021*  *Source: Filotrani May, 2021* |

Fig.5.16. Premier League Clubs 2021: Twitch and YouTube subscribers

This concentration on YouTube compared to Twitch is the pattern we see in SKY Sports. What this data says is that football fans, according to the number of subscribers, are located on YouTube. This presents a fundamental issue with the ambitions of the Premier League for the ‘ePremier League’ to connect football fans with *FIFA* players. As the data demonstrates the concentration of viewers for the live esports events is on Twitch, not on YouTube, so not having a presence on this platform means not accessing the esports audience.

Ultimately what the data shows is that simply having an esports title that simulates a sport is not enough on its own to build a bridge between sports fans and an esports community and that there is a level of complexity which makes the approach needed to run and cover esports fundamentally different to the approach for sport. A level of complexity that the data suggests was not reconciled by either the team responsible for the production of the live stream, Gfinity, nor the ‘Premier League’ responsible for the creation of the tournament, the ‘ePremier League’, which the data demonstrates has some fundamental flaws preventing it from being able to meet the objectives to give “players *(FIFA players)* the chance to live their dream of winning a title for their favourite club” (Premier League, 2018b).

This chapter has provided insights into different aspects of how mainstream media and endemic publications cover esports. The findings highlight differences in coverage between broadcasters and newspapers, as well as differences in the practices and expectations of journalists working in these fields. Additionally, the impact of the organisation of an esports tournament, as demonstrated by the ‘ePremier League’, on mainstream media coverage is discussed. Finally, the low viewer numbers for the ‘ePremier League’ Finals reveal issues with the reliability of metrics for viewer engagement, and the importance of understanding the preferred platforms of the target audience.

**Chapter 6:**

Navigating the Esports Conundrum: Dissecting the Factors Hindering Mainstream Media Coverage in the UK and Exploring Opportunities for Innovation

In addressing the research question: what factors contribute to the limited coverage of esports by mainstream media in the UK? it was essential to first establish a baseline of the current engagement levels between mainstream media and esports. This necessitated an examination of the existing landscape of esports journalism. To provide this baseline, several objectives were outlined for data collection: (1) assessing the present state of esports journalism in the UK; (2) evaluating mainstream media's perceptions of their engagement with esports; (3) determining the familiarity with the term 'esports' among mainstream media professionals; (4) identifying how esports content is categorized by mainstream media; (5) quantifying the extent of esports coverage in mainstream media; (6) measuring the viewership size of live esports events; and (7) analysing the broadcast of a live esports event.

The outcomes of this research hold importance for a range of stakeholders, such as publishers, policy makers, and analysts. For example, the National Union of Journalists and the British Association of Journalists will find the insights on current journalistic practices valuable. Educational organisations like the National Training Council of Journalists will be keen to understand the significance of professional training for journalists. In the same vein, mainstream broadcasters and esports media, including SKY Sports and Gfinity, will be interested in the findings concerning live streaming and broadcasting live esports events.

What the findings show is that if esports is positioned as a sport it is more likely to find a place within existing web architecture of news platforms but those mainstream publishers which do cover esports have not adopted any difference in approach to that of covering sport. The study reveals that broadcasters produce more esports content than newspapers, cover different esports, categorize *FIFA* esports differently, and lack clarity regarding esports content. Esports journalists, in contrast, often lack formal training, do not identify as journalists, rely on press releases, have limited reporting freedom, and mistrust mainstream media. The organisation of esports tournaments, such as the ‘ePremier League’, impacts mainstream media coverage, as the Premier League did not consider the media's role, leading to limited exposure. Furthermore, the live Finals of the ‘ePremier League’ struggled with low viewership, unreliable viewer engagement metrics, and platform discrepancies, highlighting challenges surrounding credibility and audience preferences in the esports domain.

This chapter examines the implications of the findings presented in chapter 5 for both industry and academia, using Tidd and Bessant's Innovation of Space Model: 4Ps (2021) as a framework. Focusing on position, process, product, and paradigm innovation, the chapter explores how esports can be utilised by stakeholders to drive innovation in each area. Position innovation discusses the mainstream media's position in relation to esports, particularly the BBC, and considers the potential benefits of repositioning to regain trust from the esports sector. Process innovation highlights the differences in newsgathering and working practices between esports journalists and mainstream journalists, addressing the role of unions and press cards. Product innovation investigates issues in esports titles and tournament packaging that act as barriers to mainstream media coverage, comparing the ‘ePremier League’ to the NBA2K League. Lastly, paradigm innovation examines the potential for esports to challenge mainstream media norms, prompting paradigm shifts in content production, consumption, and distribution.

**6.2. Esports as disrupter: the 4Ps of innovation**

As this is the first study to look at coverage of the esports sector by mainstream media in the UK, it is an original contribution to the emerging field of study: esports but also of interest to Media Studies, Journalism Studies, Communication Studies, and Cultural Studies as well as to industry. What the findings suggest is that changes to the production, consumption and ownership of media in the UK are provoking seismic shifts to what has been an accepted landscape of broadcasters and newspaper publishers for the past 50 years. Esports, as a new genre of entertainment, embodies a new media landscape, the formation of which is stimulating the possibility for innovation within mainstream media, for journalists, for broadcasters and for game publishers.

Tidd and Bessant’s 4Ps Innovation Space Model (2021) conceived as a framework against which an organisation could formalise its process for designing a strategy for innovation, works well for examining how esports is acting as a catalyst for change for multiple stakeholders. The chart below adapts Tidd and Bessant’s model, which places an organisation at the centre, by placing the sector of esports at the centre, with the 4Ps referring to possible directions of change by stakeholders in response to esports as a disrupter. The 4Ps are used as a strategic framework to discuss the impact of the findings.

|  |
| --- |
| *The possible avenues – position innovation, process innovation, product innovation and paradigm innovation, have been used to examine the findings in this study which point to both the opportunities for innovation and the necessity of innovation, created by the growth of the esports sector.*  ESPORTS  *Source: LJ Filotrani* |

Fig.6.1. Adapted from the Innovation Space Model: 4Ps (Tidd and Bessant, 2021)

* + 1. **Position innovation: Mainstream media and esports**

Position innovation refers to the process of creating new and unique value by changing the way a product, service, or idea is perceived in the market. This can involve challenging established assumptions and exploring alternative perspectives to identify areas of potential change or improvement. “Sometimes opportunities for innovation emerge when we reframe the way we look at something” (Tidd and Bessant, 2021, p. 25).

Tidd and Bessant use two mainstream media brands to illustrate how an organisation can ‘innovate’ through a repositioning of its brand identity: the Daily Mail ‘repositioned’ itself to be the number one newspaper for the female market in the 1980s, while the BBC ‘moved’ from a national to a global brand in the 1990s, and in doing so repositioned itself to capturing a wider audience.  It is interesting that the scholars select the BBC as one of their illustrative examples of position innovation, as this study identifies the BBC as the mainstream media organisation with the least positive relationship with the esports sector, and as such presents a new opportunity for repositioning to the broadcaster. This opportunity for repositioning has resonance for all mainstream media in the UK as the perception within esports is that there is a lack of understanding by mainstream media about the sector. This is signalled by the regular misspelling of the term esports, factual inaccuracies in reports and angles on articles that suggest a negative bias towards the industry.

That the BBC is identified specifically as a perpetrator of inaccurate coverage calls into question its role as a public service broadcaster. As the constitutional basis of the BBC, the Royal Charter (2017 – 2027) states that the corporation should: “Accurately and authentically represent and portray the lives of the people of the United Kingdom today and raise awareness of the different cultures and alternative viewpoints that make up its society. It should ensure that it provides output and services that meet the needs of the United Kingdom’s nations, regions and communities” (BBC, 2016). According to its response to the rise of esports, the BBC is falling foul of this commitment set out in the Charter, both in the scarcity of its coverage and in the inaccuracies in content leading to perceptions of inauthenticity. Whether the mistrust of the BBC, over and above other mainstream media outlets by the esports sector is warranted or whether this is simply a reflection of the fact that the BBC has the most esports content of all the terrestrial broadcasters in the UK and more than double the newspaper with the most content, the *Financial Times* (Fig.5.2. p.121) and therefore has had more opportunities to signal its ignorance of the sector, is not really relevant. What is relevant is the perception, because it illustrates how esports journalism and mainstream journalism occupy different professional spaces, targeting different audiences and specifically how the BBC is not reflective of the community which as a public service broadcaster it has a mandate to serve.

According to industry reports, the UK esports market is a significant section of contemporary society. Current estimations put the global esports audience at more than 500 million, European esports viewers at 172 million, with estimates for the UK varying between 15 and 25 million. (Newzoo 2022). If the lowest of these estimates is taken, 15 million, against the UK population, 67 million (Office for National Statistics, 2021), this means the BBC is not servicing 22% of the population. If the 0 – 15 age range is discounted, which is approximately 10 million, this percentage rises to 26%. In 2022 there was an amendment to the Royal Charter, clarifying the commitment of the BBC to produce content that “fully reflects and represents people and perspectives in the UK that currently are under-represented in that content” (BBC, 2022). This study has found that esports is under-represented by the BBC, and is not reflective of the choice of entertainment made by more than 25% of the population.

This is significant because it underlines the necessity for the corporation to redefine its position as a public service. The issue is two-fold. Firstly, a paradigm shift in how content is being accessed, and secondly growth of new genres of content, of which esports is a prime example. Currently the BBC is reliant on broadcast channels which are declining in viewership, coupled with a lack of content attractive to the audience on alternative platforms. Put simply, the BBC is neither in the same space of the growing audience online, nor is it producing content that speaks to that audience. The consequential end to this trend is that public service broadcasters such as the BBC will become increasingly irrelevant to the general public (Newman et al., 2020)

Esports is an indicator of this, particularly within the 16 – 35 age range, the age group of the most active participants and viewers of esports content (Statista, 2023). The data from this study points to an uneasy relationship between the esports sector and the BBC, and the lack of coverage of esports is suggestive that the public service broadcaster is losing touch with this age range. This is the same conclusion reached in a report by the UK government department, The Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee (House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee, 2021). While esports is not referenced specifically in this report, what is clearly articulated is the necessity for public service broadcasters (PSBs) to address the disconnect with the below 35 audience.

The relevance of PSBs to this age range formed part of the discussion at the Youth, Media and Culture Network Diaglogues@ Series, Platforms and Public Service Media (2021). When I presented my findings about both the lack of coverage of esports by the BBC and the mistrust in the sector of the content that is produced, the discussion that followed centered around how the BBC isn’t engaging with the younger demographic. The conclusion reached that the BBC and PSBs in general need a new strategy to reach this audience. In the panel discussion media researcher and sociologist Dr Grassmuck (Youth, Media and Culture Network, 2021) purported that PSBs such as the BBC believe that younger audiences ‘once mature’ will come back to the BBC and the medium of television, but with no evidence currently to support this premise, the BBC needs to go where the audience is, instead of employing a top-down strategy designed to bring the audience ‘back’ from online to traditional broadcast channels. For this purpose, a longitudinal study examining the viewing habits of the 15-35 age group as it progresses over time could potentially provide valuable insights for the broadcast media industry.

The recent inclusion of esports as a pilot event in the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham in August 2022 offered the BBC, as the broadcaster for the Games, a chance to access this audience. But the few games that made up the esports pilot were only available on IPlayer on the red button, with no attempt by the BBC to go where the esports audience is to connect, on Twitch, as was the case with the ‘ePremier League’. Following the reported success of the Games, a press release issued by the BBC does not reference esports anywhere, nor is there any mention of esports in the 35-page report produced by The Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, *Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games: The Highlights* (Department of Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport, 2022)*.* That esports will not feature in the next Commonwealth Games in Victoria, Australia, in 2026, indicates that the inclusion of esports in 2022 was not deemed a success.

The data from this study shows that currently there is no mainstream media brand in the UK that is positioned to fully capture or keep pace with the rapidly growing esports market, nor the wider gaming community. This demonstrates that esports, despite the growth in audience, is not considered a mainstream genre of entertainment. Indeed, what the data shows is a chasm between mainstream media and the esports sector demonstrated by both the volume of sector coverage and the types of content. Inclusion of esports in the coverage of the Games (2022) by the BBC suggests an interest in integrating esports into its mainstream sports coverage, as with the ‘ePremier League’, but there is no sense that the BBC, nor mainstream media in general, has any strategy that demonstrates an understanding of the esports audience, and so it is difficult to see how the BBC is committing to reflecting and representing people that are under-represented in content as outlined in its Charter.

* + 1. **Position innovation: esports and mainstream media**

It is clear from the findings that esports is not represented in any significant way by broadcasters or newspapers in the UK, and there is an opportunity here for mainstream media to reposition itself to capture this growing market. In order to reach this market, however, mainstream media needs to gain the trust of the esports community by demonstrating a commitment to covering the sector consistently and fairly. Attention over terminology, correct spelling of people’s names, understanding the ecology of the events and tournaments and displaying expertise in esports titles, would all go some way to establishing mainstream media credibility within the sector. Before this is possible however, the sector itself requires repositioning so that it is more receptive to mainstream media. The complexity of esports titles, the organisation and structures of tournaments and the opacity of the sector particularly for journalists are all contributing barriers to mainstream media coverage. The analysis of the ‘ePremier League’ shows that even with a relatively less complex esports title, *FIFA*, (less complex because it is a game of simulated football) how a tournament is organised has a direct impact on the volume of coverage by mainstream media.

Of all the esports genres, the most likely to be covered by mainstream broadcasters is sports simulated titles, and in particular football (Fig.5.5. p.124), and although newspapers on the whole cover a wider variety of esports, football-related esports accounts for more than 85% of coverage in newspapers which have a significant proportion of sports coverage. With buy in from all 20 Premier League Clubs, the ‘ePremier League’, should have therefore been attractive to mainstream publishers, such as the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Mirror*, the newspapers with the most *FIFA* content (Fig.5.6. p.125). Created and launched by the Premier League, the ‘ePremier League’ was heralded as the League to connect football fans with *FIFA* players extending the reach of the Clubs into the esports community. Premier League Clubs that have already demonstrated an active interest in pursuing a relationship with esports. This interest is evidenced by the number of Clubs which have launched their own esports teams: Norwich City (IJEsports), and Wolverhampton Wanderers (Wolves Esports) both recently joined a long list of football clubs with esports teams which include early adopters Manchester City, West Ham, Burnley and Aston Villa. What is interesting to note, is that these teams are competing in tournaments for a number of different titles, not just SIM-football games such as *FIFA* or *eFootball*. The Clubs are represented in global tournaments for *Overwatch*, *Rocket League*, *Valorant*, *League of Legends* and *Fortnite*. Football clubs in the UK are evidently involved with esports so the lack of engagement with the ‘ePremier League’ was not because there is no interest in esports, but more that there were issues with this particular esports tournament.

What should have been a way in for mainstream media to cover the tournament, through the engagement with the Premier League Clubs, was not realised. The way in which the tournament was organised did not encourage or support one of the main ambitions of the League, to connect football Club fans with *FIFA* fans and players. The lack of interest shown by the Clubs in the ‘ePremier League’ is demonstrated in the scarcity of news found on any of the Club sites regarding the League (Fig.5.10. p.144) and this lack of interest is mirrored by mainstream media. What prevented the ‘Premier League’ from delivering on its promise to create an esports league which built upon existing Club loyalty, was an issue inherent in the choice of using Ultimate Team mode for the tournament which meant that esports players were playing with squads made up of footballers across the whole of the Premier League. The Manchester United squad, for example, was not made up of Manchester United players, it was made up of players from a combination of Clubs. This meant a match between Manchester City and Manchester United, was in name only. There was no opportunity to build Club loyalty or Club rivalry and therefore the connection between Club football fans and the *FIFA* community was missing. How a football club such as Manchester United could promote matches on its own Club website during the ‘ePremier League’ when the squads consisted of players from other Clubs is not clear. Furthermore, there was a false assumption, not supported by any evidence, that the esports players who were selected to represent the individual Clubs were supporters of that Club, that they were genuine football fans who were ‘honoured’ to be representing their Clubs.

Additionally, *FIFA* doesn’t support third-party spectator mode. This is significant because it prohibited the Clubs from streaming in-game footage as is detailed in the instructions sent to the Clubs regarding the rules and regulations of the tournament (Premier League, 2018b). A third-party spectator mode is a feature in most esports titles which allows users who are not actively participating in the game to watch the gameplay from various perspectives. This mode is designed to facilitate live streaming, broadcasting, and recording of matches for viewers, commentators, and analysts. The term ‘third-party’ refers to the fact that spectators are not directly involved in the game as players (first party) or developers (second party). Instead, they observe the match as an external entity. A spectator mode typically offers features such as different camera angles, real-time statistics, and the ability to switch between player perspectives, which enhance the viewer experience and make it easier for broadcasters to cover esports events. This lack of a third-party spectator mode in *FIFA* meant the Premier League Clubs were not able to create content during the live stream with their own content teams. This factor may have contributed to the overall popularity and commercial success of the ‘ePremier League’ by creating a barrier for Clubs to showcase the *FIFA* matches, ultimately limiting the game's exposure. It is worth noting that Clubs were not allowed to send videographers to film in the main arenas during live play either.

Decisions taken over the organisation of the ‘ePremier League’ with regard to the choice of game, *FIFA* and the mode of play, Ultimate Team, display a lack of consideration by the Premier League over the ramifications of these decisions and therefore a lack of strategy of how to fulfil its promise to connect a Club’s fanbase with esports *FIFA* players and their supporters. Ultimately, what this highlights is the necessity for stakeholders to understand both the design of an esports title and how the creation of a tournament will be positioned in order to reach a target audience before creating an esports event. It also highlights the opportunity for game publishers to capitalise on existing mainstream structures by considering potential stakeholders in the design and structure of their esports titles. While this tournament demonstrates a mismatch of ambitions of the Premier League, it also demonstrates a missed opportunity for EA Sports as the publishers of the game *FIFA*, to harness the fervent Club loyalty from football fans within the Premier League in the UK. While there are modes of play available other than Ultimate Team, the fundamental design of the game of *FIFA* is centered around the individual playing the game and their selection of individual professional footballers. The design of the game is not anchored to the football Clubs. Repositioning the game so that it offers the chance to Premier League Clubs to extend their brand loyalty by having modes of play for Club against Club would connect football fans with *FIFA* players in a way which the ‘ePremier League’ set out but failed to do. This would have created more opportunity for coverage of the tournament both on the Club websites and a greater chance of aligning with mainstream media.

Arguably the failure of the ‘ePremier League’ can be levelled at the selection of the game *FIFA*, and its limitations in being able to match the needs of the Premier League. What is clear from this example, is that the selection of esports titles need to match the needs of tournaments and the design of esports titles should accommodate distribution by a number of outlets on a variety of platforms. If in the design of a game or tournament there were considerations over the timings of games for example, or length of play, the adjustment of which would accommodate transmission of a match on terrestrial television, with opportunities to connect advertising across platforms, sponsorships and commercial viability in general, this would help position the esports title/event better for mainstream media coverage. This repositioning through the design of the games and the tournaments make the sector more receptive to broadcasters and newspapers.

Tournaments such as the ‘ePremier League’ provide a clear demonstration of what happens when mainstream media is not included in the planning and distribution of an esports event. The complicated triangulation of the partnership between EA Sports, the ‘Premier League’ and Gfinity Studios, saw the named media partner SKY Sports sit outside of any role in the production of the live Finals. As the findings show this led to a gap between the production of the live stream and the distribution of that live stream. The impact of which was low viewing figures for the live Finals across both Twitch and YouTube (Figs.5.13/14. p.154) and a lack of engagement across all mainstream media (Fig.5.3. p.122).

This is a consideration for tournament organisers employing esports production companies, which although have the expertise for managing live streamed events do not come with their own audience. This leaves a question over how the content is going to be distributed and promoted. SKY Sports, as a producer of sports content, is both producer and distributor. SKY Sports produces content for its own audience. Prominent esports production companies such as Gfinity Studios, or Gravity Media, or esports engine, are independent producers. Companies which will create bespoke content for a client, design graphics, provide broadcast solutions, supply talent, and encode content ready for distribution, but do not have an audience. As such, any organiser employing them to produce an esports live event needs to have a separate strategy in place for reaching an audience. Interestingly the company that took over Gfinity for the ‘ePremier League’ Finals 2022, recently launched blast.tv, a direct response to this issue of being a producer of content but not having a unique platform for creating an audience. BLAST.TV is described as “the ultimate platform where millions of esports fans will come together to watch, chat and be entertained by the best content from our world. It’s a radical new way to watch esports.” (BLAST, 2022) Essentially BLAST has set up as a broadcaster.

What is evident from the data is that esports as a sector needs to reposition itself so that it is more open to the requirements of mainstream media if the sector is to be covered by broadcasters and newspapers more consistently in the UK. This repositioning can be fundamentally in the design of new esports titles and in the organisation of tournaments as discussed, but also in the way in which the sector is categorised. The data shows the confusion within mainstream media about how to categorise esports content has an impact on how to resource it editorially and how to position it in terms of distribution. The impact of this confusion and lack of clarity is not confined to whether the sector is covered by mainstream media or not, however. It also impacts the way in which the sector is positioned against factors such as access to government resources. Not being classed as a sport for example means the sector isn’t eligible for funding by Sport England, and as referenced in the literature, how the sector is classified has implications for governance (Holden et al. 2016)

Clearly defining what esports is and where it sits can only be beneficial. What is also worth pointing out, is that the sector doesn’t currently have its own SIC (Standard Industrial Classification of economic activities) code, which means the economic impact of the sector is not recognised. Does it fall under activities of sport clubs, or other sports activities, or other amusement and recreation activities, or rather does the revenue sit under video distribution or publishing of computer games? It isn’t clear. As the SIC codes are used to determine business trends, identifying which industries are growing and which are shrinking, not having a code for esports prevents the sector from being included. Having some clarity by the sector over the category that best describes esports could encourage a specific SIC code to be allocated. This would allow the sector to establish its contribution to the digital economy of the UK. By repositioning esports more fully within the category of sports for example, aligning it more clearly with current web architecture on news platforms, would make it more, rather than less, likely to be included by mainstream media in its coverage.

Opportunities exist for both mainstream media and esports to reposition themselves so that they make sense to both the esports community and a mainstream audience. Using the lense of position innovation to interpret the findings from the analysis of the ‘ePremier League’ served to demonstrate two things. Firstly, that the BBC as a public service broadcaster is failing to reach more than 25% of the population by not covering esports and that the esports community needs to be reached on the platforms where they are located, and secondly, that mainstream media need to be considered in the planning of events and indeed in the design of esports titles. So, while there needs to be repositioning from mainstream media’s perspective in terms of how it is perceived by the esports sector, there is also a repositioning necessary within esports, in order for the content to be more transmissible by broadcasters and less opaque for newspapers to follow.

As Diffusion of Innovation theory identifies positive stories about an innovation as one of the final stages for the innovation to be accepted by the mainstream, the esports sector should be actively participating in repositioning the narrative from a negative discourse to a positive one in order to secure its future sustainability. It is therefore imperative that mainstream broadcasters such as the BBC are not perpetuating a negative slant on gaming/esports and for this to happen esports needs to facilitate the navigation of the sector so that it can be accessed and understood by mainstream journalists. The conclusion drawn from the findings of this study that contrary to the perception that esports doesn’t need television, and by inference all mainstream media, as opined by high profile industry figures such as caster Chaloner (2020), mainstream media is very much needed for future growth and sustainability of the esports sector.

**6.4.1. Process innovation: Journalism and esports**

Of the 4Ps identified by Tidd and Bessant (2021), process innovation is often seen as the least exciting. It is concerned with how things are done, the management of processes within an organisation, and the innovations can be overlooked as they are incremental and not visible to those outside of an organisation. This in fact makes process innovation highly valuable and the return for companies innovating their processes far greater than those companies launching new products. “While new products are often seen as the cutting edge of innovation in the marketplace, process innovation plays just as important a strategic role” (Tidd and Bessant, 2021, p. 10). New products can be imitated. Company processes much less so. Tidd and Bessant point to the shift in consumer behaviour with regarding to shopping as an example of a successful change in processing. The innovation in process by retailers pivoting business strategy from face-to-face transactional relationships to online purchasing, a trend accelerated by the pandemic. With respect to esports and specifically the findings from this study, innovation through process can be realised through two impactful ways. Firstly, the process through which journalists are recognised as professionals and secondly, the process in newsgathering and the working practices of journalists.

The data demonstrates a gulf between those journalists employed by mainstream newspapers and broadcasters compared with those journalists working for endemic esports publications. What is evident is that mainstream journalists are operating in a different environment than journalists working outside of mainstream. Explicit differences can be seen in the disparity of pay and the diversity in the training and background of entrants to the profession. More implicit differences can be detected in the language used to describe their working practice. Esports journalists rarely use the word journalist to describe their role. This is in contrast to mainstream media journalists who nearly always identify themselves with the term. Why this matters is because it denotes a tiered system of journalism in the UK, where identification with the profession is limited to those working within established mainstream media brands. To date there hasn’t been any study specifically looking at the contemporary ecosystem of journalism in the UK with this as the focus. It is an area which would benefit from further inquiry.

The findings show the standard process of becoming a professional journalist in the UK, through education and formal journalism training leading to the application for a press card, was not articulated as a pathway to the profession by any of the esports journalists interviewed for this study, nor any reference made to the Unions (see p.133). As press cards are recognised by the police in the UK, and other public bodies, and as a signifier of professional standing as a journalist, they are an important working tool. With such a high percentage of esports journalists not having any formal education or training within journalism, the process through which an individual would formally join the profession of journalist, that is by applying for a press card through one of the two main unions (the National Union of Journalists or the British Association of Journalists) is not evident within esports.

The question therefore is how relevant are the unions for esports journalists and new entrants into the profession generally? If new entrants outside of mainstream are not seeking validation and accreditation through press cards, how is the process of professionalisation within esports journalism to be recognised and maintained? Furthermore, not having any formal journalism training it is probable that esports journalists have not been exposed to frameworks such as the NUJ editorial code of conduct, in place since 1936 to safeguard the working practices of journalists, or the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) Editor’s Code of Practice which most of the mainstream newspapers publishers in the UK voluntarily commit to. How can the process change to be more inclusive of those entering the profession of journalism from alternative pathways? The fact that the British Association for Journalists actively excludes bloggers from qualifying for a press card, for example, does little to encourage those working outside of mainstream to consider themselves as part of the profession of journalists. As the process of applying for a press card through the BAJ is not open to someone whose content is published on blogs, by definition a blogger is not a journalist. With 75% of those in esports journalism coming from blogging backgrounds, this exclusion is significant.

Why this point is worth labouring is because it underlines the fact that there are sectors where people working in journalistic endeavours are discounted as professionals because blogs form a central source of news and features, and it exposes the process for crediting individuals as professional journalists as outdated and out of touch with contemporary journalism practice. Findings from this study support the view from scholars such as Lowery (2006) that blogging has ‘poached’ areas of neglected journalism, of which esports is an example. The concept of what constitutes a blog, or to give it its full title, ‘weblog’ has developed from what it initially referenced – a collection of online personal reflections, written and maintained by an individual. This is still the definition in the Oxford English Dictionary and yet it does not describe what is now currently accepted a blog. Would the British Association for Journalists (BAJ) for example refuse a press card to someone writing for *HuffPost*? This news and features platform started life as a blog in 2005 and employs thousands of ‘bloggers’ to write news and features. Are they not considered journalists? Or *BuzzFeed*. With more than 100 million monthly viewers (BuzzFeed, 2021) would a person working for this news blog fall outside the parameters set by the BAJ? (worth noting that *BuzzFeed* News won a Pulitzer in 2021 for its investigative reporting on China’s internment of Uyghurs.) And what about those journalists who run newsletter-based businesses using platforms such as Substack? Would Andrew Sullivan’s political blog *Daily Dish*, and his newsletter the *Weekly Dish* on Substack, qualify him for a BAJ press card? The *Daily Dish* employs a team of journalists and has a readership of 1.2million monthly uniques and his newsletter just under 120,000 subscribers, 20,000 of which are paid subscriptions. The point being made here is that the process through which the BAJ determines who is a professional journalist and who isn’t is out of step with the working practices of a vast number of people, including those working within esports. Exclusion from the Unions means they fall outside of the frameworks in place to maintain standards of practice within the profession.

The combination of a lack of formal training in journalism coupled with a reticence to use the term journalist to describe what they do, makes those working for endemic esports publications unanchored by the profession of journalism. By their own admission esports journalists say the lack of training has caused complications in covering content and not just simply in the mechanics of how to put a story together but also in understanding what is and what isn’t allowed as a journalist. This last point is particularly worrying when considering stories about journalists being banned from press briefings for not conforming to stringent rules set by the game publishers and event organisers in esports as articulated by Ashton (see p.141). The acceptance by the esports journalists that this is just the way things are, is where the lack of formal journalism training shows itself most readily.

The practice of banning journalists from press conferences if they are perceived as not abiding by the strict rules set by the game publishers is worrying but the banning of journalists is not confined to esports. The silencing of voices not echoing dominant ideology is becoming increasingly prevalent in countries that have formerly been beacons for press freedom. In the United States for example, The White House saw an unprecedented banning of several news organisations from attending briefings, during the Trump administration with many press conferences called to a close when the line of questioning from the press wasn’t deemed appropriate. Similar scenes followed in the United Kingdom under former Prime Minister, Boris Johnston. The Conservative Prime Minister tried to ban reporters from press briefings in 2010 but faced a boycott of all the political journalists who walked out in support of colleagues.

According to the Global State of Democracy Indicies (2019), the trend of censoring the press is on the increase, measured by the decline in freedom of expression. Europe has 14 countries showing a decline in freedom of expression, measured over the period of 2012 to 2017 (Silva-Leander, 2019). Autocracies in Europe are seeing despots such as Putin flex their control over the flow of information. At the outbreak of the war on Ukraine for example, more than 40 journalists in the United Kingdom were banned from entering Russia. Governments are seeking to make changes to legislation that otherwise have protected the rights of journalists to report in the public interest. The Turkish parliament for example banned one of the presidents of the Journalists’ Union of Turkey preventing her from entering the building while trying to push through a new bill in 2022 giving the government more control over censorship of the press. “The restriction of freedom of expression isn’t just a violation of the rights enumerated in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but also a direct attack on an important mechanism of democratic accountability: a free, unbiased and critical press” (Silva-Leander, 2019). Reporters without borders (RSF) in its most recent *World Press Freedom Index* 2022 declared that the world is in a state of polarisation. Its Index which assesses journalism in 180 countries and territories, suggests that unregulated online information is encouraging fake news and opening the door to propaganda (Reporters Without Borders, 2021).

What can be seen in the protest against the banning of political reporters at press briefings in the United Kingdom is a collective understanding by mainstream media against this kind of regulation by government which is antithetical to democracy. A demonstrated understanding that a central job of a journalist is to hold those in power to account in the public interest, to challenge what doesn’t seem right and to protest against any censorship of the press. This is not the case within esports, where the banning of journalists from press conferences is a regular and accepted feature of esports events. What this suggests, is the lack of formal education and training in journalism within esports means there aren’t the same checks and balances in the sector ensuring an independent press allowing esports journalists to challenge those institutions and persons of power.

What is needed is a change in process by organisations such as the National Union of Journalists and the British Association of Journalists to embrace all who are engaged with journalistic endeavour. Journalists working online, on social media, and in sectors that are not being covered by mainstream media, should be actively encouraged and welcomed to apply for press cards and there should be a requirement for those being awarded a press card to demonstrate knowledge of both editorial codes of conduct and media law to ensure that anyone working as a journalist understands the basics of reporting. The current climate of esports journalism demonstrates that it is not possible to rely on the market to protect journalism which is acting in the public interest. It is incumbent therefore on organisations such as the unions, and the regulators, IPSO and Ofcom for broadcast, to uphold the standard of journalism in the UK so that journalists reporting in any sector can be counted on to challenge those in power in the public interest.

What compounds the issue of a lack of formal training in journalism is the status of employment in endemic esports publications. Journalists working within the sector have roles where the blurring of the line between commercial and editorial makes independent reporting difficult. The fact that 75% of the esports journalists interviewed for this study had no prior experience in journalism before being employed as an esports journalist (Fig.5.9. p.132) or had received any formal training on or off the job, coupled with the high percentage who have responsibilities for producing PR content alongside editorial (p.134), means there is both a lack of journalistic skill and an antipathetic environment for independent reporting. This is why it is concerning that mainstream media is not covering the sector and why it is important for esports to actively engage newspapers and broadcasters so that independent reporting in the sector is treated with the same rigor as the sports industry. Currently the power that the game publishers wield is unchallenged. 2022 has seen a number of key esports journalists leave the industry through disillusionment over the perceived low quality of journalism in the sector. Adam Fitch, interviewed for this study, has been vocal about the lack of opportunity to report independently and the low bar of entry for esports journalists working in the sector which has translated in poor coverage. His disillusionment led to him first to leaving journalism behind for a more clearly defined corporate content role with recruitment company Hitmarker, and then leaving the esports sector completely.

* + 1. **Process innovation: Newsgathering and working practices of journalists**

A consistent comment made about mainstream media by the esports journalists interviewed for this study is that journalists working for mainstream newspapers and broadcasters are not active on the same social media platforms as the esports community. While the platforms under scrutiny for this study are Twitch and YouTube, it is worth noting that the platform mentioned the most often as a source for esports journalists is Reddit. As has already been discussed in the analysis of previous studies in Chapter 2, this is a platform that has attracted little focus in academic research with regards to journalism practice and yet, it is a main source of news for esports. The esports community on Reddit are the pulse of what is happening in the sector, as editor of *esports News UK* Sacco (2020) notes:

If you look at Reddit and those sorts of social aggregated websites, you have different subreddits now. So, you have a *Counter-Strike* subreddit. You have a *League of Legends* subreddit … it’s gamers out there and fans of those specific esports and game titles, reporting on the news. You know, finding when a player has signed to another team, or, a player’s been banned, or whatever the news story is. They’ll get on it and break it fast, because they’re in that community (Sacco, Interview, 08/07/20).

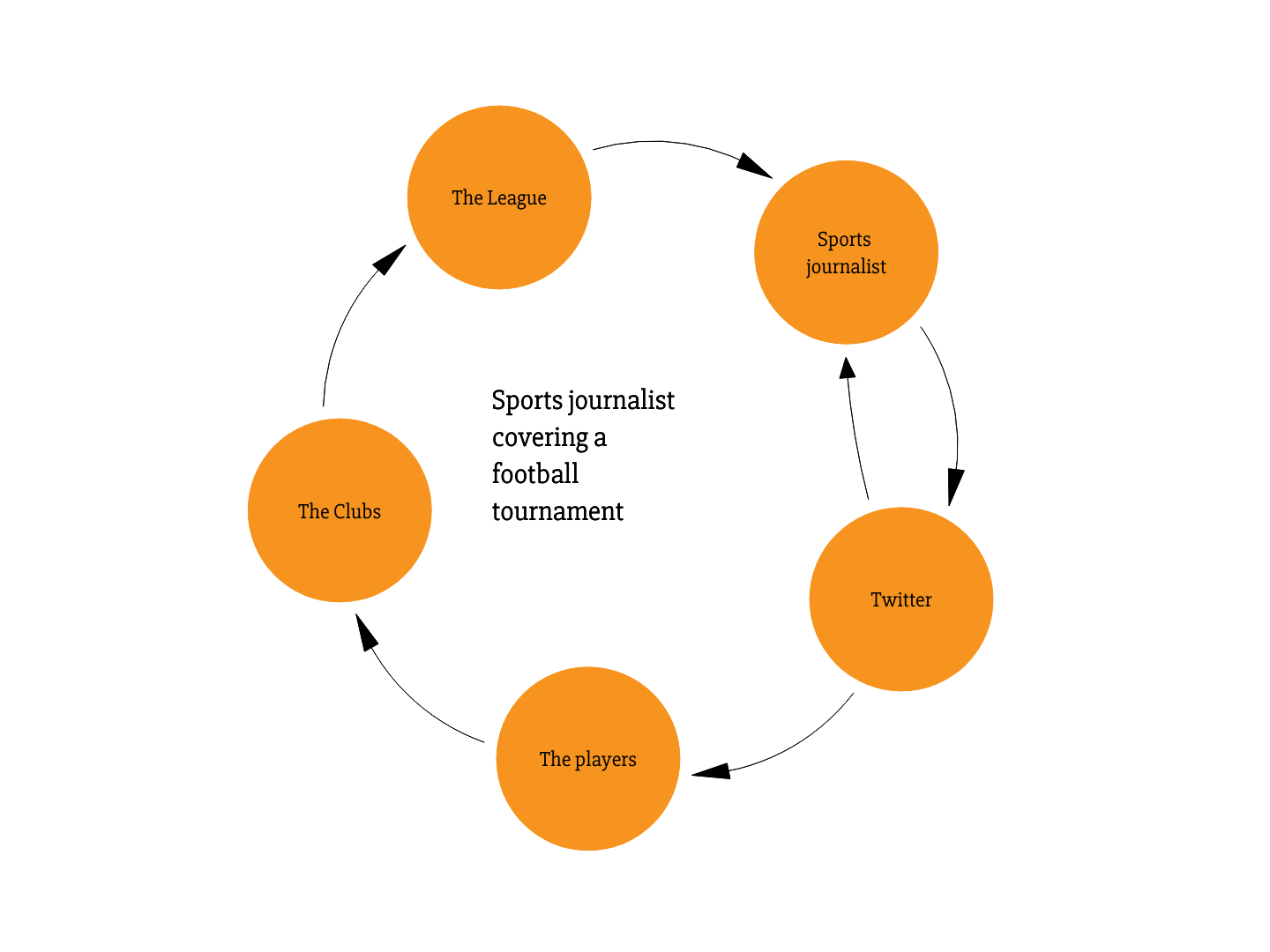
Depending on the metric system, Reddit ranks either in the top ten websites in the world (Semrush, 2023) behind, Google, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Wikipedia or in the top twenty (similarweb, 2023) Launched in 2005 it is described as a social news aggregator with more than 50 million active daily users (Reddit, 2023). There are more than 100,000 active communities on Reddit, called Subreddits – and esports has a number of the most popular groups. The subreddit for *League of Legends*, r/leagueoflegends for example has 6.1 million members and r/globaloffensive a subreddit for *Counter Strike*, 1.2 million. And yet, it is a platform conspicuous by its absence during the ‘ePremier League’. The esports community on Reddit was not linked in any way during the ‘ePremier League’ by mainstream media, or by EA Sports or the ‘Premier League’.

What is curious, is that many of the mainstream newspapers have Reddit sections on their websites, the *Independent*, the *metro*, the *Mirror*, the *Daily Star*, the *Guardian* and the *Daily Mail* for example all have a Reddit page with curated posts, but there is no identifiable mainstream media presence actually on the platform, commenting on or posting original content. As esports news is often broken on Reddit, the fact that mainstream journalists are not active on the platform means they are not in a position to be authoritative voices about the sector. Not understanding where the news is broken in esports adds to the perceived lack of credibility of mainstream media for covering esports and is an illustration of how the process of newsgathering is different for esports journalists compared with those working in mainstream. As there doesn’t appear to be much in the way of engagement with Reddit, do the original posters of content in the subreddit communities even know that their stories are being curated by mainstream newspapers? Consequently it is unclear what value this content adds to a newspaper.

It is also unclear of what value pages of curated Reddit content on newspaper sites brings to a subreddit community. As a content strategy, aiming to attract new audiences such as the esports community to branded news sites to retain viewers/readers, it raises a significant question: what would motivate the esports community to turn to television and newspapers for coverage when their discussions and content creation are on alternative platforms? Shouldn’t the focus be on interacting with audiences where they are already engaged and communities are being formed, rather than attempting to disperse these groups by redirecting them from platforms like Twitch to newspaper sites? Quality, independent reporting by mainstream journalists ought to be situated where the esports audience is actively participating. Thereby ensuring that the content is reaching the target audience where they are most engaged, respecting the dynamics of the community and meeting the audience’s needs more effectively. By embedding quality journalism within these active communities, media outlets can build trust and credibility, and foster a more organic relationship with the audience, instead of trying to relocate them to traditional platforms. This shift in strategy underscores the importance of understanding and adapting to the evolving media consumption habits, particularly of niche communities, who have distinct preferences and behaviours in content consumption.

As it stands, there is a sense of insularity about an agenda seemingly designed to take content from one platform to be repurposed and reposted as if ‘original’ content on a newspaper site, as is the content published on the Reddit sections on the newspapers named above. A strategy provoking similar criticisms, already discussed, levelled at public service broadcasters such as the BBC, designed to drive an audience back to its own websites instead of engaging the audience where it is located and in doing so, ring-fencing that audience from wider communities. Indeed, an audit of external links on the BBC News website, lends support to this as a desired outcome. In the audit conducted in 2019, Ofcom found only 15% of links on BBC articles were to external websites. Every other link was to another BBC article (Ofcom 2019). This internalisation of content creates an insularity which runs counter to recommendations for the BBC to become a ‘phenomenal marketing portal’ for local news, to publish stories and links to local newspaper websites instead of rewriting its own version. To look outwards instead of inwards. A recommendation proposed by senior newspaper executive, David Dinsmore, in *The Future of UK Journalism* report (House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee, 2020).

Reddit's role as an alternative news source represents just one of several distinctions between newsgathering processes in esports and those in mainstream media. A more notable difference lies in the expectation for esports journalists to include blogs and live streams as part of their coverage. Esports journalists not only report on specific games or tournaments but also focus on streamers and content creators with substantial followings. Contrastingly, a traditional sports journalist covering football, for example, is typically tasked with reporting on players, matches, clubs, and related business aspects. However, an esports journalist covering a game like *FIFA* must also monitor and report on the activities of streamers and content producers within the same domain. This ongoing interaction between the community and journalists creates a more dynamic newsgathering process in esports compared to mainstream media. The chart below (Fig.6.2) demonstrates a simplified workflow of the newsgathering process to illustrate the difference in complexity between sports journalists .



*An esports journalist must cover an event, the players, the teams and the business of esports if reporting on a FIFA tournament, as well as covering the streamers who are also producing content on the tournament*

*A sports journalist must cover a match, the players, the clubs and the business of football if reporting on the Premier League*

A picture containing graphical user interface

Description automatically generated

Fig.6.2. Differences in the process of newsgathering: sports compared with esports

What makes things particularly complex for covering esports for journalists is that the streamers, very often professional esports players, have their own audience and are therefore able to break news directly to the fans. Castro\_1021, for example has 3.2 million followers on Twitch, BATESON87 has just under a million. While the pro *FIFA* players Tekkz, has 390k and Msdossary 230k followers. The ability of these streamers to break news challenges the process of traditional journalism, something recognized by Newman in his *Trends and Predictions for Journalism* report 2022. Newman uses an example of how a streamer on Twitch was able to secure an exclusive interview with footballer Lionel Messi as an illustration of the power of these streamers and streaming platforms such as Twitch. No traditional media was invited to interview Messi apart from Spanish streamer Llanos, who has nearly 9 million followers on Twitch. Interestingly in light of the findings of this study which shows a reticence of esports journalists to identify with the term journalist, streamer Llanos, despite his exclusive interview, doesn’t consider himself a journalist. (Martin, 2021)

Direct access to the fans through the streamers/professional esports players makes the process of esports journalism fundamentally different to mainstream journalism. Whereas in sports a journalist sits somewhere in between the professional footballers and the fans, in esports the journalist sits outside of the relationship between the streamer/proplayers and their community of fans. And because of this, as the example with Llanos shows, the fans have no need of traditional journalists to break any news. The fans have a direct channel of communication to the source of the news, the streamers, and this places them in a much more informed position than football fans in mainstream media. This in fact makes the esports community a source of news, which is why platforms such as Reddit and Twitch are so integral to the newsgathering process in esports. News is broken by the extra layer of content creators and streamers on Twitch and on Reddit. With mainstream media not being active on platforms such as Twitch and Reddit, the differences in the processes of newsgathering forms another barrier preventing mainstream journalists from covering the esports sector effectively.

Ultimately, there is a constant telling and retelling of news across different platforms which makes esports incompatible with time-based linear media which typifies mainstream media. Mainstream operates on different platforms, not engaging with the community. These are therefore two separate media spheres. The value of platforms such as Reddit to mainstream media is not in providing a cheap way of creating content, by gathering curated posts to publish under the guise of new content, instead the value is in the community. The power of the platform lies in the collective voice of the community. As illustrated in 2022 in a co-ordinated movement which threatened to bring down the global stock market. The movement which saw retail investors disrupt the intention to short the stock by hedge fund investors of a gaming company Gamestop, played out almost entirely on Reddit, with the White House following the developments closely (Davies, 2021; Phillips and Lorenz, 2021). The implications for the global stock markets were so wide reaching that President Biden was poised to step in.

Given the size of the communities on Reddit, and the power of the subreddits to inform change, it is somewhat surprising that the platform has not attracted more interest by centres such as the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. While Instagram, Tik Tok and YouTube have all been highlighted as trends to be watched, Reddit is not considered a platform of influence for journalists. This is all the more surprising considering the executive summary of the *Journalism Future’s* report highlights the ‘generational change’ taking place with regards to the consumption of journalism “leading to more internal soul-searching in newsrooms over diversity and inclusion, about emerging agendas such as climate change and mental health” (Newman, 2022). In light of this it would seem prudent of news media to take note of the voices on Reddit. As content on Reddit is voted up or down by the community, the more votes up, the higher the content is displayed in a channel’s stream, it is the community who decides what is of interest, what needs highlighting and what needs to be pushed off the agenda by voting content down. The direction of the editorial agenda of a subreddit is therefore a democratic process and one which challenges the traditional authority of a news editor to choose the news agenda on behalf of the public.

To sum up the interpretation of the findings of the coverage of the ‘ePremier League’ through the lense of process innovation reveals a number of things. Firstly, that there is a fundamental issue with the identification of the term journalist within esports. This is partly the result of a lack of formal training in journalism within the sector and partly the practice of converging editorial with commercial in the roles of journalists employed in endemic esports media. Secondly, that the process by which the dominant Unions representing journalists in the UK credit individuals as professional journalists is discriminative and not relatable to those working in esports, leaving them outside of the profession. The recommendation of this study is that a more active role be taken by the Unions to develop standards and training for new forms of newswork such as esports journalism. To do this they will need to seek out those working in sectors such as esports to identify where there are skills gaps and develop new standards where relevant. A presentation on the key findings of this study will be suggested to the NUJ as this is work that will be of critical necessity going forward. They will need, for example, to reassess the qualifying requirements for press cards so that the process is more inclusive and reflective of contemporary journalism practice.

Secondly, within esports the recommendation is that endemic esports media reconsider the division of labour awarded to roles of journalism to ensure independence in reporting, free from the constraints of public relations. Additionally, that there is a commitment within the sector to provide a basic level of training in journalism for those entering the profession without any prior experience or qualifications. This is to ensure all working as esports journalists have a basic level of skill in reporting, media law and adhere to a set of editorial codes of practice. This would safeguard both the individual working as a journalist and the publication they are reporting for. It would also drive the levels of journalism up within the sector, combatting the bar of entry for esports journalists working in the sector which has translated in poor coverage. Ultimately encouraging those working in esports to identify as professional journalists.

Thirdly, mainstream media can learn from the example set by esports journalism about the changes in processes of newsgathering stimulated by social news and streaming platforms such as Reddit and Twitch. The direct access to fans through the streamers makes the esports community vital for the flow of news. What the findings demonstrate is the need for journalists to go where the audience is located. Without mainstream media changing the process by which it sources stories, new audiences such as esports will remain unreachable.

**6.5.1. Product innovation: esports titles**

Tidd and Bessant identify product as the category that most people associate with the term innovation. Product innovation is not just about the creation of new products however, it is also about new developments to existing products and as such the line between process innovation and product innovation is somewhat blurred. “New product development is an important capability because the environment is constantly changing” (Tidd 2021, p. 10). The scholars point to the Amazon Echo range as a notable example of product innovation that is also process innovation in that this range of products has changed the way people do things. Product innovation covers new versions of established products through to improved performance and new to the world products: inventions never before seen. With respect to esports and specifically the findings from this study of *FIFA* and the ‘ePremier League’, the opportunity for product innovation rests in the product of esports titles, in the product of esports tournaments and in the product of esports broadcasts.

As has already been discussed in the section on position innovation, the data from this study points to settings chosen in the design of EA Sports title *FIFA* which prevented the ‘ePremier League’ from meeting the needs of key stakeholders, the Premier League Clubs and their respective football fan-base. The design of the game as a whole has come under criticism also for playability, articulated by many of the esports journalists and industry experts interviewed for this study. Criticisms which include a pay-to-win model which distinguishes the game of *FIFA* as a consumer-led product against most other esports titles which are player-led products such as *League of Legends*.

Ultimate-team mode, used for the ‘ePremier League’, is particularly contentious as it requires players to invest in player packs in order to compete with the highest level of players. The purchase of player packs has been equated with gambling as the quality of the players in the purchasing packs varies, making the process a lottery. As industry expert Keane (2021) identifies: “It’s not an esports first strategy, it’s a consumer-led gaming product where it’s a free-to-play game, with an esports capability which is built on a pay-to-win basis” (Keane, Interview, 10/08/19).

Those who are able to acquire the ‘best’ players have squads with the highest levels of play and therefore make the level of competition uneven. The more money a player spends, the more likely they are to have a winning squad. It is not free-to-play as with most other esports titles. While the playing field was level in the ‘ePremier League’, as the esports players who qualified for the Finals had equal access to an approved list of players when selecting their squads, Ultimate-Team mode means those with money have an unfair advantage in qualifying

for other *FIFA* tournaments, significantly the ‘eWorld Cup’ which is the tournament with the highest prize pool.

Another issue levelled at the design of the game is that unlike nearly every other esports title there is a new version of *FIFA* every year. This means players are required to buy and instal the latest version with new features and new play functionality every season. Many of the skills learnt to compete on *FIFA 18* are not transferable to *FIFA 21*, for example. Playability changes with each iteration. This makes it problematic for esports professionals: “You learn something for 9 months, and then you have to start all over again for the next season.” (Keane, Interview, 10/08/19). But for industry expert Keane, and for many others, the biggest issue with *FIFA* is the use of artificial intelligence (AI) within the game. AI allows a player only control over the attacking play, none of the defence. So, there is no control over the goal keeper for example. This function is covered by the AI. This means that only half of the game is active, rendering the design of the game suitable for casual play and not professional esports. Industry expert Keane explains: “When you are attacking, I am in control but when I am defending the AI kicks in – the keeper and the defenders are controlled by the AI” (Keane, Interview, 10/08/19).

The difference between casual and professional play is not insignificant. A casual game is built on the basis that a player will be sporadically playing, picking up and leaving off with periods of time in between. Compare this with a professional esports player, who spends hours every day, practising continuously on a game. The function of a game that is designed to meet the needs of a casual player is therefore very different to those of a professional esports player.

The use of artificial intelligence to control half of the game also highlights a problem that simulated sports games face more generally as a genre of esports. That is the difficulty AI causes with playability in terms of the level of randomness which is an intrinsic element to real-life sport. *FIFA* has a very low threshold of randomness which makes the experience for both the viewer and the player, in Stewart’s words ‘lacklustre’ (Stewart, Interview, 25/07/19). Indeed, the most popular esports titles, Counter-Strike, League of Legends, DOTA 2, or Overwatch, don’t employ artificial intelligence in the same way. For these titles, play is completely in the hands of the esports players. What distinguishes these games as different to FIFA, is that they were designed as esports titles, not video games that have been adopted for esports. The creation of the game FIFA, predates the growth of esports. FIFA was first available to play in 1993. The game wasn’t designed for esports. It was designed as a casual video game, which has now had esports bolted on. Counter-Strike, League of Legends, DOTA 2, and Overwatch are also not simulating an existing real-life sports game. The impact of randomness and unpredictability on spectators within sports is an area of research (Pawlowski et al. 2017; Buraimo et al. 2015), that has resonance for esports, particularly in the product innovation of both esports titles and tournaments. As of yet, this area has not attracted scholars.

**6.5.2. Product innovation: Esports tournaments**

It was not the focus of this study to examine the mechanics of the game of *FIFA*, nor to evaluate the impact of playability on the viewer experience, however, the analysis of the ‘ePremier League’ tournament shows that decisions over the organization and structure of esports tournaments impacts on engagement by viewers (Figs.5.12/13. p.154). For the ‘ePremier League’, as a product, choices concerning the mode of play had significance on both the playability and on the viewing experience. A different selection of format for the tournament could have mitigated against the lack of randomness offered by the design of *FIFA*. Simply moving from a 1v1 format (a single esports player against another single esports player) as was the choice for the ‘ePremier League’, to a format which allows esports players to compete in teams, would have injected an element of uncertainty to the tournament compensating for the lack of randomness in the game. That uncertainly would have been provided by the dynamics of the esports teams, and the unpredictability of how a team member interacts with each other under pressure of live play.

In the product that is the ‘ePremier League’, the choice of settings for play, Ultimate Team mode, structures the tournament as 1v1, that is one esports player competing against another single esports player. In this mode, each single esports player controls a virtual team of footballers on the pitch in a game which allows active control over attacking play only. All defensive moves, as already discussed, are controlled by the artificial intelligence. The result is a static, linear game where the unpredictability of play is minimal. There were no modifications to the game for esports, exposing the ‘ePremier League’ tournament to criticisms of being undynamic (Keane, Interview, 10/08/19). An alternative choice for the ‘ePremier League’ could have been a 2v2 tournament, a team of two players versus another team of two players controlling one squad. Or, as in the option available in Proclubs mode on *FIFA*, 11 esports players could form one team and play in representative positions on the pitch against another team of 11 esports players. By having more than a single player competing against another single player, there is an additional element of randomness. There is an unpredictability created by the dynamics between the esports players making up the teams and in the decisions over formation and strategy of play taken by the coach.

The difference that is made in terms of the mode of play is further illustrated in a comparison with the most popular esports title to date, *League of Legends[[21]](#footnote-22) (LOL). A LOL* tournament has two teams of five players, each playing a role in a battle to destroy their opponents’ base. All ten players pick a ‘champion’ to battle as. Each champion has different abilities and different skills. The gameplay is therefore the strategy of the esports team and the selection the team makes in terms of the choice of champions they want to go into battle with. There is a dynamic at play therefore both inside and outside of the game. There is unpredictability in how the five team members will perform together as a team and in how they individually perform as their ‘champion’ and how the two teams match the opposing combinations of champions, in the game. This scenario made possible because of the mode of play: 5v5. While, both 2v2 and 11v11, are options available within *FIFA*, they were not the mode of choice for the ‘ePremier League’. Instead, the choice of Ultimate Team mode created a 1v1 tournament structure. In this comparison of *League of Legends* (*LOL*) with *FIFA*, it is clear to see there is a difference between a game that is designed as an esports title and a game that has been made an esports through the creation of tournaments. *LOL* is designed as an esports product. *FIFA* is a casual video game which has been used to create an esports tournament ecosystem. Interestingly, for *FIFA 23*, EA Sports announced a new competition in the ‘eWorld Cup’ circuit, which is a 2v2 mode of play.

Another comparison which serves to illustrate how decisions over the organization of esports tournaments can have impact on engagement with fans, is with the American basketball league, the ‘NBA2k[[22]](#footnote-23) League’. This is an equivalent simulated sports league to the ‘ePremier League’. The NBA2K League, which launched in 2017, the year preceding the ‘ePremier League’, is a partnership between the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the game publishers, Take-Two Interactive which is comparable to the venture between game publisher EA Sports and sports organisation, the ‘Premier League’. The ‘NBA2k League’ uses a modified version of the basketball game NBA2k, specifically designed for esports and this League. As has already been noted, the ‘ePremier League’ has no such modifications to the consumer game *FIFA*.

Other than the fact that there are no modifications to the game *FIFA*, one of the most notable differences between the two leagues is in the mode of play. The mode of play for the ‘NBA2K League’ is 5v5. Similar to *League of Legends*, the game of NBA2k is played by teams of five esports players against another team of five. Another key difference between the ‘ePremier League’ and the ‘NBA2k League’ is that the esports players in the ‘NBA2k League’ compete as a unique character (archetype) not as an existing basketball player in the NBA, and are not controlling an AI-assisted team of professional basketball players. There is no artificial intelligence used within the game.

An additional and significant difference is that each esports player is employed by an NBA team making this a league of professional esports players. The organisation of the ‘NBA2k League’ sees the esports players become professionals by being drafted onto the national basketball teams. This mirrors the process for the National Basketball Association (NBA) draft, which sees basketball players contracted to teams across the NBA. Esports NBA2k players are paid a salary for the season and a performance-based bonus, making them part of the NBA teams they are selected for. Esports players in the NBA2k League are therefore legitimately affiliated to the basketball teams, in the NBA. The impact of this is that there is an apparent synergy in the ‘NBA2k League’ between the esports players, the NBA teams and the NBA fans, in a way that is notably absent in the ‘ePremier League’.

The ‘ePremier League’ is by contrast open to both amateurs and professionals, with many more amateurs than professionals qualifying for the Finals. In 2019 for example, 12 amateurs qualified compared to 8 professionals. It is unsurprising however, given the hours of practice necessary to master an esports title, that the winners of both ‘ePremier League’ Finals in 2019 and 2021 are professional esports players. Donovan Hunt (F2Tekkz) won in 2019 and Shaun Springette (Shellzz) won in 2021. Notably Shellzz is one of the few *FIFA* esports professionals contracted directly by a ‘Premier League’ Club, Manchester City. F2Tekkz, by comparison is contracted to esports team Fnatic.

To date, there has been limited research on the ‘NBA 2K League’ and its influence on NBA fans. One of the few studies that addresses the NBA 2K League is by Rogers, Farquhar, and Mummert (2020), which investigates the motivational differences between traditional sports and esports audiences. However, their research does not examine the tournament structure or analyze the League's impact on NBA fans. Research in this area would be beneficial to understand how (if any) impact the design of a tournament structure such as the NBA2k League has made on both engagement with fans and with coverage in mainstream media. It seems probable that the synergy created between the esports players and the NBA teams makes the ambitions of sports clubs to bridge the gap between esports and sports fans more likely. Conversely, this study demonstrates the structure of the ‘ePremier League’ actively created barriers preventing the tournament from delivering its promise to connect real football fans with the *FIFA* esports community. The esports players in the ‘ePremier League’ had no real affinity to the Clubs they were representing. The Premier League clubs were not playing against each other, instead individual esports players competed against each other as pseudo-Club players. Packaged this way, it is not hard to understand why the tournament, and in particular the Live Finals, was problematic for mainstream media, as is evidenced by the lack of coverage (Fig.5.3. p.122).

A further implication for the mode of play chosen for the ‘ePremier League’ is in the complication it caused in the broadcast of the live Finals. In the ePL, because individual esports players control teams of professional footballers on the pitch, the casting (commentary) during the live Finals constantly swapped between the performance of the esports players and the actions of the professional footballers controlled by the esports player. The design of the ‘NBA2k League’, by comparison, allows a concentration of the casting (commentary) on the esports professionals and their ability and skill in the game because the esports players are on the court, in the game, not controlling a representation of an existing NBA player.

The confusion created by the commentary of the ‘ePremier League’ Finals is a contributory factor in a perceived lack of credibility for the tournament (Keane, Interview, 10/08/19). This stems from the allowance of the esports players to choose from any of the Premier League footballers on an approved list, meaning that the squads were made up of players across the whole ‘Premier League’. The attempts by the casters during the live Finals, therefore, at creating Club rivalry were disingenuous. This disingenuity was particularly noticeable in terms of narratives around constructed derbys, Manchester City versus Manchester United for example. Bliss (2021) illustrates: “If you look at a bog-standard Man City fan, for example, and you say, Man City are doing the esports on the ‘ePremier League’, they’re not going to be interested, because the person isn’t a Man City fan, there’s no Man City players in his team” (Bliss, Interview 11/03/21). For the ‘NBA2k League’, by comparison, because the esports players are contracted to an NBA team, there is legitimacy in narratives concerning team rivalry. Equally the concept of home and away has significance in a way that isn’t possible in the ‘ePremier League’.

More generally, what the analysis of the ‘ePremier League’ has highlighted is that national and local identity is a clearly delineating factor between esports and sports. Location is not a factor of importance within esports. Esports fans are not geo-located in the same way that football fans are. To date there is little research around the impact of locality on esports fans and whether aligning esports to more traditional franchise models of major league sport could make esports more marketable to a mainstream audience. Interestingly, attempts to move esports into this model were made by game developer Blizzard[[23]](#footnote-24) in 2020, launching a ‘homestead’ *Overwatch* League in America, where esports teams were representative of a city and were rostered to travel across the country to play home and away matches against each other. Covid prevented the league running in this format however and plans to realise the venture have yet to be reinstated, so evaluating the success or otherwise of this as an initiative is not possible.

What has been demonstrated by this study is that the design of esports tournaments as products should meet the needs of the community and sports fans, if this is a target. Furthermore, the data shows that the choice of structure for a tournament is key to its success. One of the criticisms levelled at the recent inclusion of esports in the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham is that the tournament structure for *Dota 2* was unsuitable for the competition. That structure, a best of one, round robin, being rendered not fit for purpose when three out of eight teams failed to show up on the day to compete. No changes were made to accommodate the reduced numbers of competing teams meaning teams played just two single games before being knocked out.

This level of competition was completely out of synch with the level of competition for the Commonwealth Games and left esports players questioning the credibility of the organisers and the legitimacy concerning the reasons for including esports in the Games. A consideration for the International Olympic Committee (IOC) following the announcement of its inaugural ‘Olympic Esports Week’ in Singapore, June 2023 (IOC, 2023). This ‘Esports Week’ will see the launch of the ‘Olympic Esports Series’, an esports tournament with virtual and simulated sports, including baseball, motorsport, cycling, rowing and sailing, culminating in an in-person live Finals. The structure and design of the tournament will be key to its success.

**6.5.3. Product innovation esports broadcasts**

Positioned as a ‘gateway’ to esports, it seems improbable that organisers of an esports tournament which purports to bridge the gap between real sports and digital sports as was the stated ambition for the ‘ePremier League’ (EA Sports, 2018), would not consider media coverage in its design. As the game predates esports it is understandable that there are intrinsic design elements making the game in some respects unsuitable for competitive gaming. However, as has already been noted, there were no modifications to the game for the ‘ePremier League’, nor any concessions made to the organisation of the tournament to make the aim of converging football fans with the *FIFA* community achievable. As the viewer data from this study demonstrates simply having an esports title that is the digital equivalent of a sport, in this case football, is not enough on its own to connect sports fans with the esports community and vice versa. And, worth noting is that *FIFA* is not considered a top ten esports title. *FIFA 20*, for example, only ranked 19 in the most popular games to watch on Twitch in 2019, with 503m hours watched compared with number one ranking *League of Legends* totalling nearly 7bn hours watched[[24]](#footnote-25).

The viewer data of the ‘ePremier League’ Finals, shows that neither sports fans, nor the esports community was engaged. Indeed, it is not obvious from the broadcast of the Finals who the intended audience for the live stream is. From the design and format of the programmes football fans are the focus, and yet, as demonstrated by the relatively few Premier Clubs that showed the Finals (Fig.5.10. p.144) and the scant coverage across all mainstream media, football fans were not directed to the content. Just 2% of sports journalists surveyed had watched any of the coverage, and no mainstream news journalists had even heard of the ‘ePremier League’. Furthermore, with more football fans and clubs located on YouTube (Fig.5.16. p.162) and more esports fans on Twitch, it is not clear how the ‘ePremier League’ was to act as a bridge between football and esports with neither coverage by mainstream media nor the ‘Premier League’ football Clubs.

What has been demonstrated clearly from this study is that esports events require a differentiated approach from live sporting events in terms of broadcast. *FIFA*, as used in esports, is not simply a video game version of football and as such cannot be covered in the same way as a sports broadcast covers a football match. A number of factors of difference make the approach nuanced for esports. These factors include: differences in timings for games and tournaments, direct interaction with the community and the practice of co-streaming which is leading to a paradigm shift within broadcasting.

The analysis of the live stream for the ‘ePremier League’ (ePL), highlighted that these factors were not considered for the Finals. Instead, there is evidence that there was a concerted effort to align the broadcasts of the live Finals to existing football-focused programmes that are familiar on mainstream linear and subscription television channels. In both ePL Finals 2019 and 2021, similar broadcast features which can be said to be synonymous with studio-based football programmes, such as the BBC’s *Match of the Day*, are utilised. Namely, the programmes are presenter-led with guests/pundits in the studio providing match analysis, graphics/explainers are employed to provide detailed data regarding play, the programmes include live interviews with players and combine a mixture of live match play and highlights. (A breakdown by segment of the opening programmes for the ‘ePremier League’ Finals in 2019 and 2021 can be seen in Appendix C).

Furthermore, the parallels with football-focused sports programmes are drawn from the branding and design, the aesthetics of which can be seen as analogous particularly to flagship football programme for Sky Sports, *Monday Night Football* *(MNF)[[25]](#footnote-26).* My observations from the content analysis of both seasons of the live Finals are that the design of the studio at Gfinity, where both of the ‘ePremier League’ Finals were hosted, is reminiscent of the layout of the studio used by Sky Sports for *Monday Night Football (MNF).* The set design for the studio hosting the ‘ePremier League’employs a colour scheme that combines the branded blue of the *Monday Night Football* studio set, together with the iconic branded purple of the Premier League. Both the use of familiar football broadcast features in the programmes and the visual identity created through the adoption of similar colour schemes and studio layouts has the effect of positioning the ePl with the Premier League, and the live stream with the broadcaster, Sky Sports. Ultimately aligning the *FIFA* esports tournament with sport, and more specifically football.

What is most noticeable about the live streams is the lack of reference points to the esports *FIFA* community. There was no engagement with the viewers through any direct communication in the chatboxes on Twitch, or on any other social media platform during the live Finals. As has been noted, for esports, “the ethos of communicating while playing is built into the structure of the game” (Miah, 2017, p. 82), so the lack of connection with the community is a signal that the peculiarities of esports have not been considered in the planning and execution of this particular esports broadcast.

The significance of not engaging with the community can perhaps be illustrated by comparing viewers of the ‘ePremier League’ with viewers for the ‘NBA2k League’, which has as part of its broadcast strategy response to viewer feedback from the chatboxes on Twitch. The ‘NBA 2KL’ 5v5 Finals on Twitch recorded more than 1 million viewers in 2021. The ‘ePremier League’ Finals reached just 266k (fig.5.13. p.154). The strategy employed by the ‘NBA2k League’ is to interact with the esports community during live broadcasts and to respond in real-time to questions, comments and suggestions both about match-play but more importantly about how the broadcast can be improved for the viewer. President of the NBA2k League, Brendan Donohue identifies this as a peculiarity of the esports audience, that there is an expectation that broadcasters are actively listening to the viewers in a live stream and responding through the chatboxes (Murray, 2020).

The communication function afforded by the platform Twitch is one of the key differences Taylor (2019) notes between television and Twitch. Television, a medium of distribution; Twitch an interface for dialogue between audience, broadcasters and player. Unlike the ‘NBA2k League’, there was no attempt to engage the viewers on Twitch during the ‘ePremier League’ Finals. There was no communication, and no response to comments from EA Sports, or any of the hosts or casters during the programmes leaving the community disconnected and outside of the live stream in a way that is antithetical to Twitch, built as it is on the basis of interaction between streamers and viewers.

**6.6. Paradigm innovation: Media production, consumption and distribution**

The final P in Tidd and Bessant’s 4Ps of Innovation Space model, is paradigm innovation. This direction of change is when a traditional belief system (old paradigm) is replaced by an alternative understanding creating a new paradigm. “The adoption of a new organisational paradigm is more than a process innovation, as it requires a shift in values and associated power structures” (Tidd and Bessant, 2021, p.177). This change can be triggered by a number of factors such as the introduction of new technology or new markets or new regulatory considerations, which force a new understanding for a company, an organisation or a sector. The scholars use examples of the deregulation of utilities markets as an example, pinpointing energy and telecommunications as illustrative sectors that have gone through a paradigm change. Both energy and telecommunications have moved from services to commodities. For telecommunications this can be seen most clearly in the development of bandwith as a commodity to be traded. As energy and telecommunications have become tradable stock, innovation in technology has opened up new possibilities for meeting consumer demand for that stock, and in doing so has changed the monopolistic landscape of both. Another example the scholars point to is a paradigm change in mass collaboration seen in companies such as Lego and Adidas. These companies have used mass collaboration as a tool in the design process, to inform decisions about strategy for innovation. These companies incorporating their customer base into the process for developing new products, making company growth dynamic and their consumers active rather than passive. (Tidd and Bessant, 2021).

Parallels can be drawn in esports for both of these examples of paradigm innovation. As demonstrated by the data from this study, esports is challenging accepted mainstream media constructs in content production, consumption and distribution and the growth of the sector can in part be attributed to the power of mass collaboration, that is, the esports community. Paradigm shifts in broadcast media are being driven by the increased and diverse competition afforded by the internet. Streaming platforms such as Twitch and YouTube offering broadcasters the opportunity to reach an audience through direct-to-consumer strategies without the need of television as a distributor. A change in distribution methods which is consequentially forcing paradigm innovation in a variety of areas including; media rights, particularly relevant for football coverage, intellectual property and regulation.

Football coverage across Europe can be seen as illustrative of how the contemporary landscape of sports’ media is changing. Instead of a dependency on mainstream television broadcasters to distribute coverage of live matches, many professional football leagues across Europe have created in-house production companies to broadcast matches to the fan-base, adopting direct-to-consumer strategies, as outlined in previous chapters (pp. 56 - 62). This together with new players in the sports media market such as Amazon demonstrates a paradigm change in the broadcasting landscape for sport. A change scholars Hutchins, Li and Rowe describe as an “historic shift in the global marketplace for sport coverage rights and the media systems through which live content circulates” (Rowe, 2019, p. 975). According to industry reports, Amazon entering into the sport broadcast media landscape suggests the partnership has helped increase the English Premier League’s reach by a third in the UK (Impey, 2019). The immediate relevancy for esports is that Amazon owns Twitch.

In 2014 the acquisition of Twitch by Amazon gives the conglomerate access to an audience growing year on year. According to Twitch, it currently has 30 million unique users viewing live streams every day (Twitch, 2022). Not only does ownership of the platform mean Amazon has market dominance of the sector, it is a signal to mainstream media of the paradigm shift that is taking place in broadcasting. Amazon has evolved from an ecommerce platform to a distributor of entertainment, to a producer of content through its channel Amazon Prime. The launch of Amazon Home Internet Service in 2023, will see a further evolution to an internet service provider (ISP) affording the company the ability to offer a seemless end to end experience for the user. As an ISP Amazon will have the power to manage the bandwith to let certain applications perform better than others. Traffic shaping by throttling data to slow down its service, for those companies not paying a premium. The very antithesis to net neutrality on which the internet was founded.

# What is happening with the esports sector and the ‘ePremier League’ demonstrates, is the competition mainstream broadcasters face in the entertainment space. In buying media rights to show live football matches, and having its own streaming platform, Amazon is bypassing television and mainstream broadcasters. Together with direct-to-consumer strategies employed by Clubs, football is no longer dependant on television as a medium of distribution and esports has no need for television to legitimise the sector. Furthermore, with the power shifting into the hands of internet service providers, there are questions for the future longevity of public service broadcasters such as the BBC. If the BBC cannot sustain itself via the licence, a contention debated regularly in the UK, and is no longer able to attract a sizeable enough market share of the audience in the UK, what is its future?

It is not just in broadcast media that this study finds signals of paradigm innovation. The data points to limitations also within mainstream newspaper media and the sector’s inability to accommodate new genres of content because of rigid structures of content management systems. As is noted in the industry report *Futures of Journalism*, large media companies with ‘monolithic’ websites are challenged by the prospect of servicing audiences with different needs. This is consistent with the findings from this study. Demonstrated in part by the variations in choice of category for esports. Both newspaper and broadcasting platforms illustrating the difficulty in fitting hybrid content within existing website architecture. A signal that a paradigm shift in how content is considered by mainstream media is needed. The suggestion in the report is that content management needs to be modular to allow for better connections across different story genres, “making it easier to reassemble content in potentially limitless ways” (Newman 2022, p. 37).

While the suggestions by Newman may afford a flexibility to accommodate new genres of content, they don’t address the more pressing issue, that of the disparate audience, no longer captive on one channel or one medium. With media consumption now dispersed across multiple channels, broadcasters and journalists are forced to navigate competing platforms for an audience. This challenging environment made all the more competitive by the entry of a new generation of content creators (streamers), with direct access to viewers and subscribers. The professional streamer’s ability to connect with viewers without mediation is leading to a paradigm shift in the role of mainstream media particularly noticeable in sports. Industry reports document how partnerships between streamers, sports organisations and platforms are challenging the dominance of mainstream media in live sport. Co-streams between Netflix, the NBA and Formula 1, serve as an illustration (Newzoo, 2022).

The significant importance in the integrated role between the streamers and the viewers (Wulf, Schneider and Beckert 2018) is unacknowledged in the ‘ePremier League’. Esports fans support individual players rather than teams. Sports journalist Bliss (2021) illustrates: “Look at Tekkz, Msdossary, or Ryan, Harry, fans support these individual esports players. And even though they’re signed to a team, like Hashtag United, or FNATIC, any of the big teams, they have their own fan base because they stream live on Twitch” (Bliss, 11/03/21) And yet, the opportunity to co-stream the tournament between Twitch, the Premier League Clubs and SKY Sports, was not realised, nor was there any indication that the importance of the professional esports players and the relationships with their fans is recognised by any of the stakeholders involved in the tournament.

The findings discussed in this chapter emphasise the gap between mainstream media and the esports industry, resulting in a lack of accurate and unbiased coverage. As public service broadcasters like the BBC risk losing touch with the 16-35 age demographic, there is an urgent need for them to develop strategies that demonstrate a deeper understanding of the esports audience and better fulfill their mandate to represent under-represented communities. The esports sector must also work to bridge this gap by repositioning itself to be more accessible to mainstream media, addressing the complexity of esports titles, the organisation of tournaments, and increasing transparency for journalists. Engagement with alternative news platforms such as Reddit is vital for mainstream media to effectively cover esports and adapt to the evolving audience and changing media landscape. The analysis of the 'ePremier League' underscores the importance of designing esports tournaments to cater to the needs of a target audience, and the need to include mainstream media in the planning and distribution of esports events. The study also calls for journalism unions to be more inclusive, develop standards, and provide training for emerging forms of journalism, such as esports journalism.

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Chapter 7:

Unveiling The Future: Unlocking Esports' Potential In UK Mainstream Media

This study reveals that the esports sector in the United Kingdom remains significantly underrepresented in mainstream media. The primary research question, ‘What factors contribute to the limited coverage of esports by mainstream media in the UK?’, has been addressed by identifying various barriers that impede journalists from reporting on this entertainment domain within both the esports sector and mainstream media. Within the esports sector, it has been observed that game publishers hold a gatekeeping role, which restricts the flow of information and hinders independent reporting. Additionally, the design of games and tournaments is not conducive to easy transmission via television, and there are no established strategies for distributing esports content through newspapers and broadcasters. In the context of mainstream media, the inflexibility of monolithic websites presents challenges for incorporating novel content genres, such as esports. Furthermore, mainstream journalists are not active in the spaces where esports events occur or where the esports community engages in discourse. This issue is exacerbated by the ambiguity surrounding the categorisation of esports, as it is unclear whether the content covering the sector should be classified as sport, technology, or business. Consequently, the integration of esports content within the existing web architecture that delineates news media online in the UK becomes a complex endeavour.

Why these findings are significant lies in the fact that esports has not yet solidified its position as a sustainable long-term industry. As supported by Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation Theory (2003), mainstream media support is crucial for esports to gain acceptance among the general population. Without this acceptance, the future of esports remains uncertain. Furthermore, mainstream media is grappling with its own sustainability challenges. Failing to cover emerging entertainment areas like esports, which offer opportunities to engage a growing online audience amid declining TV viewership and shrinking newspaper readership, could lead to a bleak future for traditional media.

As the first large-scale examination of esports' role within the UK media ecosystem, with a particular emphasis on esports journalism this study contributes to knowledge and fills an existing gap in the literature. There has been to date no prior research on esports journalism or even references to journalists or journalism within the context of esports. Moreover, the study brings attention to esports journalism as a field of employment, noticeably absent from a recent summary of the esports labour market by Johnson and Woodcock (2021). Until now, no research has analysed esports through the lens of mainstream media coverage in the UK or traced the development of this emerging area of journalism. By addressing these gaps, the study offers a comprehensive account of esports journalism's evolution and provides an overview of current esports media catering to the UK audience.

Moreover, there is a significant gap in the rigorous scientific research focusing on esports audience metrics. Data collected from industry reports (Swindlehurst, 2019), interviews with esports journalists and with industry experts suggest a tendency for inflating live esports event viewer numbers, of which using ‘viewerbots’ is just one example. This factor contributes to scepticism regarding the validity of officially published data used to promote the sector. Additionally, the absence of a governing body for the sector leaves esports dependent on game publishers and event companies to publish market data regarding engagement of both viewers and spectators. The obscurity of this environment, characterised by customised algorithms, is further intensified due to the absence of transparency from streaming platforms such as Twitch and YouTube with respect to the composition of their total viewer numbers. The experience of anomalies witnessed between my own recorded statistics of viewers and unexplained spikes in traffic during the live streams compared with officially released statistics creates questions about the veracity of the data used to evaluate the success or failure of an event or a tournament. The data published from Chinese platforms has been identified by esports journalists as particularly problematic.

In the absence of a comprehensive industry-wide regulator or ombudsman, the prevailing atmosphere of self-promotion perpetuates distrust. Furthermore, with esports events being privately organised, journalists facing bans for scrutinising the accuracy of data from official press releases issued by game publishers lack any recourse. Rogers (2003) underscores the critical role of credible data in facilitating mainstream acceptance of an innovation, thereby emphasising the imperative for enhanced transparency in calculating and verifying these figures to foster market confidence. This study accentuates the importance of precise and dependable data as a prerequisite for the progression of the esports industry and its acknowledgment by mainstream media.

This study aimed to address seven research objectives. First, it sought to gauge the landscape of esports journalism in the UK through interviews with esports journalists and content analysis. Significant differences were found between journalists working for endemic esports publications and those employed by mainstream media, including their entry into the profession, role expectations, content types produced, and day-to-day practices. Esports journalists tend to rely on press releases instead of original reporting, lack formal journalism training, and experience constraints in covering stories independently. They often hesitate to describe themselves as journalists, suggesting that the term is less relevant within the esports sector. Mistrust between esports and mainstream media journalists arises due to the frequent misspelling of the term ‘esports’ and inaccurate or misrepresentative story angles, with the BBC identified as a publisher making significant sector errors.

Second, it aimed to assess the perception of esports by mainstream media using surveys and content analysis which revealed that mainstream media lacks clarity regarding esports content and more specifically journalists are unclear about who is employed to cover this area of content by their publishers. Third, the study aimed to determine the mainstream media's familiarity with the term 'esports' through surveys which showed an increase in familiarity from Survey 1 in 2019 to Survey 2 in 2020 but this familiarity with the term did not translate into more content coverage of the sector.

Fourth and fifth it sought to identify how esports content is categorised by mainstream media using surveys and content analysis while at the same time quantifying the amount of esports content covered by mainstream media. It was found that mainstream newspapers and broadcasters cover esports differently in terms of content quantity, genre, and categorisation. Broadcasters produce more esports content than newspapers, but only sport-focused broadcasters generate a relatively significant amount, and there is a notable difference between terrestrial and subscription-based broadcasters, with esports content absent from terrestrial TV in the UK. Newspapers cover a broader range of esports games and employ more diverse categories for their content, while broadcasters solely use sports or football-related categories for *FIFA* content.

Sixth, it aimed to measure the viewership size of a live esports event using content analysis. It was found that the lack of mainstream media coverage, poor signposting of schedules, and confusing programme structures led to low viewer numbers for the live 'ePremier League' Finals in both 2019 and 2021. Upon analysing the viewer numbers on YouTube and Twitch, discrepancies emerged between my recorded concurrent viewer numbers and the officially published statistics by the two platforms, casting doubt on the credibility of the metrics used to report on esports events' success or failure. Furthermore, the recorded data showed unexplained spikes in traffic during live streams. Despite these concerns, the data reveals a significant difference in market share between YouTube and Twitch in esports content, indicating that the two platforms serve different audiences and perform distinct functions.

Seventh, the study sought to analyse the broadcast of a live esports event through content analysis. It was found that the organisation of an esports tournament, such as the 'ePremier League', significantly affects its coverage by mainstream media. The ‘Premier League’ did not consider the role of mainstream media in the launch of the 'ePremier League', resulting in inadequate coverage and failure to bridge the gap between football fans and the esports community. The 'ePremier League' was not of interest to publishers during either of the live Finals analysed in this study, as evidenced by the lack of content before, during, and after each event. Despite ‘Premier League’ Clubs expressing interest in esports, they were not engaged with the 'ePremier League'.

Overall the findings point to a tension between new and legacy media with audiences on live streaming platforms such as Twitch outperforming audiences on television. The lack of coverage by mainstream media demonstrates that esports is a marginalised sector leading to a conclusion that the five key factors needed for adoption by the mainstream, as identified by Rogers (2003): relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability and observability have not been met. While esports as an innovation signals a clear demonstration of relative advantage over sports broadcast media in reaching higher viewing numbers for live tournaments on live streaming platforms comparable with live sports on television, what is evident from the surveys, the interviews and the content analysis is that there are issues within the sector concerning the other four factors.

The interviews with the esports journalists and the surveys with the mainstream journalists underline a complexity of the sector which makes it is difficult to navigate for those outside of esports and there are questions over the credibility of the metrics used to demonstrate success. The surveys illustrated confusion over the term esports has contributed a further barrier to mainstream coverage and a gap between how mainstream media perceives the sector and how the sector perceives itself. The interviews with the esports journalists point to an insularity within esports media that is contributing to a bubble of self-promotion. A scarcity of independent reporting and an opacity of statistics used to measure the success of the sector contributory factors. This bubble is being sustained in the interests of the game publishers. Communication channels through which an innovation is diffused (Rogers, 2003) in order for it to be adopted by the general populous, that is, mass media, are not engaged for esports, and the social structures which are needed to cement an innovation, in this case the sports fans and the esports community, not fully realised. Without these two components, the critical mass needed to secure esports for the long-term, according to the theory, has to be in question.

The esports sector in the UK has changed considerably since the start of this study, many of the changes precipitated by the global pandemic of COVID-19. The landscape of the ‘Intel Extreme Masters’ (IEM) 2017 in Katowice, Poland, with 173,000 in-person spectators and 46 million unique viewers online[[26]](#footnote-27) that marked the beginning of this research, looks different in 2023. Although post—pandemic events are beginning to attract audiences back to face-to-face tournaments, recent industry figures on average show there was a decrease in esports viewer engagement in 2022 (Deloitte, 2022). Many major tournaments across Europe recorded drops in viewership (Šimić 2022) with many esports teams and organisations struggling to find sustainable business models (Nyström et al., 2022). Economically the esports audience is undermonitised (Deloitte 2022) with revenue heavily dependent on brand sponsorship making the sector precarious.

The recent bankruptcy of cryptocurrency exchange FTX highlights the risks in depending on brand sponsorship, particularly from volatile sectors like cryptocurrency. The FTX collapse dissolved a $210 million sponsorship deal between esports team TSM and the exchange (Randles, 2022) and prompted Riot (creators of the leading esports title in the world *League of Legends*) to terminate its sponsorship agreement (Fisher, 2022). Esports' global nature aligns with the instant accessibility of cryptocurrency, which bypasses volatile local currencies and government financial regulations. However, associations with cryptocurrency and the rise of cryptobetting have not stabilised the sector. This example further underscores the importance of an independent media to report on the sector and to interrogate the data. It equally lends support to the argument for a globally recognised governing body for esports.

In 2019, when this study commenced, expectations for esports as an emerging entertainment phenomenon were high, and the anticipated growth trajectory was steep. The COVID-19 pandemic offered a unique opportunity for public acceptance, as esports filled gaps in live sports broadcasting during global lockdowns. Although visibility increased through celebrity invitationals, the study reveals that esports failed to capitalise on this advantage, concluding that the sector must be more receptive to mainstream media. Mainstream media coverage could potentially contribute to the sector's sustainability, so esports must adapt to the requirements of such media to facilitate content packaging and transmission, which the study indicates is not currently the case.

Esports tournaments do not conform to a format that is easily transmissible on UK television. Continuous streams and uninterrupted gameplay conflict with traditional commercial television conventions, such as advertising. Equally Ofcom’s Broadcasting Code rules regarding sponsorship and advertising within programmes particularly with reference to cross-promotion across channels are further barriers to mainstream coverage of esports tournaments. Ofcom regulations determine that broadcasters in the UK are required to maintain editorial control over programme content and ensure a clear distinction between advertising and programme elements. Additionally, the promotion of products and services within programmes, undue prominence of any product or service, and product placement, defined as including or referring to a product or service within a programme for payment or valuable consideration, are all prohibited (Ofcom, 2020). Significant financial penalties for breaching these rules make content such as esports where the lines between editorial independence and sponsorship of content are blurred, a risk to mainstream media. Additionally there are Ofcom sanctions and costly fines to television and radio broadcasters for ‘dead air’. Streams ‘going down’ during live tournaments is commonplace (as witnessed in the ePremier League Finals) within an esports broadcast. Yet another risk to a mainstream broadcaster. Regulatory changes in broadcasting are under review by Ofcom, potentially leading to a more flexible approach to television programming in the UK. However, modifications to tournament organisation and future esports title design are also necessary.

Equally revised strategies for content delivery by media organisations are needed in order to reach the esports’ audience. Mainstream journalists should inhabit the platforms where news about the industry is being broken, such as Reddit and not with the purpose of driving traffic back to branded websites but to use these platforms as end points for publishing content and interacting with the esports community. It is also incumbent on sports media to learn from esports events which have a multiplicity of access points for an audience and require a differentiated approach in broadcast, switching from single-focused sports such as football to covering games which have several points of focus, multiple locations of play happening simultaneously.

It is essential to address this issue, as the convergence between digital and physical activity in sports is likely to grow rather than diminish. If sports media struggles to cover esports in its current form, the concern arises about how it will adapt when esports transitions from screen-based consoles and PCs to incorporate augmented reality (AR) technology and physical competition, as exemplified by games like *HADO*. The Japanese game is an example of where the future of esports and sports more generally could lie. Essentially a game of dodge ball, *HADO* is played on a physical court but the ball is digitally generated and viewed by the athletes through augmented reality viewing devices. Created in 2018 the game of *HADO* has an already established ‘World Cup’ with competitive Leagues happening globally throughout the year. The inclusion of *HADO*, at the gaming festival Insomnia in 2022 supported by ESL Premiership, one of the UK's largest esports tournament operators, demonstrates the growing embrace of such games within the esports domain. Indeed, endemic media has already begun discussing *HADO* as an esports title (Sacco, 2022).

These AR sports, which operate at the point of intersection between gaming and sport spell the future for esports and could offer a way of providing clarity in the sector as confusion over what esports is and consequentially how this content is categorised remains a key challenge for both academia and industry. Is it sport, isn’t it sport? As more video games integrate physical activity with AR technology, the term esports could come to solely denote the genre of games that are fantasy strategy games. An alternative term could be coined to describe the genre of games that have their roots in sports either as representatives of existing sports games or by the integration of physical activity with video gaming. That term could be ‘asports’: ‘a’ as representative of alternative, augmented, activity. Returning to my definition of esports set out at the beginning of this study, the addition of specific genre of game would I believe provide greater clarity for both mainstream media and the sector. The definition of esports would then become *the practice of professionalised video gaming in the genre of fantasy strategy through licensed tournaments*. Any game which simulates sports games and/or integrates physical activity with the digital play would be classed as the alternative term ‘asports’, thus putting to bed the question of whether esports is sport or not. Having this clarity of definition, I believe, would allow mainstream media to categorise the sector more confidently. In doing so, increase the probability that professional, competitive gaming is taken more seriously as a significant part of the digital economy by journalists in the UK.

This division between games which are sports related and those that are not can already be recognised with the selection of titles accepted into the roster of games by the International Olympic Committee. Over the course of this study the argument for accepting esports as an Olympic event has moved from a definite no to the launch of an inaugural ‘Olympic Esports Week’ in Singapore, June 2023 (IOC, 2023). A week dedicated to virtual and simulated sports. What is noticeable is that there are no esports titles included which are not sports related.

What started out as a fairly innocuous research question; ‘What factors contribute to the limited coverage of esports by mainstream media in the UK?’ has raised more questions at a macro level. Conceptual considerations concerning mainstream media as a construct and the role of journalism and journalists in society. In answer to the research question the findings point to fractures within the media landscape in the UK that will require much deeper investigation and further study. As independent esports production companies move towards becoming broadcasters with their own platforms of distribution, and their own audiences, the implications for mainstream media require inquiry. Trilateral relationships between broadcasters, streamers and game publishers provoke questions about ownership of data, intellectual property and the subsequent rights to generate income from licensing. Questions over who owns and crucially regulates channels of distribution will be key in determining the future landscape of British media. Equally as Amazon repositions as not only a platform of distribution and producer of content, to an internet service provider, there are questions to be asked about what this infrastructural control over mass media channels means in terms of political power. Undoubtedly the changing dynamic between the new and established actors will bring opportunities for economic gain for some and losses for others. All of which demands scrutiny from scholars.

This investigation into esports and the sector’s relationship with mainstream media has provoked an over-arching sense of urgency for public service broadcasters such as the BBC to crystallize a strategy based on evidence from studies such as mine, in order to preserve the legacy and protect a service in danger of extinction. An assumption discussed at a Youth Media and Culture Network event (Filotrani, 2021b) that young people once mature will ‘return’ to the medium of television and leave live streaming platforms, has no basis in evidence. It is therefore imperative that if content strategies are to be based on this assumption, then longitudinal studies monitoring the viewing habits of the 16 – 35 age group as it matures are needed. The results of such studies will be fundamental in shaping the direction of programming on television channels such as the BBC. Without these studies, a content strategy based on the assumption that streaming platforms are transitional mediums is a gamble with irrevocable consequences.

Equally, a topic warranting future discussion might explore the openness or otherwise of sports media to alternative sports. The landscape of televised live sports events in the UK can be seen to appeal to specific demographics, displaying a rigidity and adherence to pre-established audience expectations, illustrated best perhaps by the prolonged duration it took for women’s football to secure broadcast slots. Despite the first Women's FA Cup taking place in 1971 it wasn’t until 2020 before a deal was signed between the FA and broadcasters Sky Sports and the BBC for the rights to broadcast matches. Mainstream media has historically favoured traditional and established sports while underrepresenting or overlooking emerging, more diverse sports. Given the restrictive and traditional nature of sports broadcasting, one must question its applicability in the discourse surrounding the marginalisation of esports. The reluctance and adherence to traditional sports broadcasting practices are perhaps emblematic of a broader conservative approach observed in the presentation and selection of sports events by mainstream media in the UK. The exploration of such dynamics could offer valuable insights into the intersection of media conservatism, audience evolution, and the emerging significance of alternative sports like esports in the contemporary media landscape.

As streaming platforms such as YouTube and Twitch mature, differences in both market share and functionality require enquiry. Understanding the difference between the platforms is key to reaching audiences as this study shows. The ‘Premier League’ did not understand that the two platforms reached different audiences; the esports community on Twitch and football fans on YouTube, and so it followed, a tournament aimed at building a bridge between these two groups was inevitably challenged. With no plan in place for connecting the two platforms it is difficult to see how this challenge was to be met. What this study has shown is the necessity of understanding the idiosyncrasies of different platforms and the indispensability of a strategy for interconnection. Idiosyncrasies revealed by this study, that Twitch is dominant for live streams compared to YouTube for pre-recorded content, or non-live, demands a more rigorous investigation as the distinction will have importance to future developments in broadcast, and more specifically, sports media.

Given the global nature of esports one of the limitations of this study isthat it is confined to the UK media. Differences in the way mainstream media handles esports content in the US was evident in considering Perreault’s findings (2018) discussed earlier (p. 37) which showed a concentration of business journalism in covering the sector. This is at odds with findings from this study which shows an emphasis of esports being covered within the category of sports. This tells us that coverage of esports is differentiated according to nation. How each country covers the sector therefore would be interesting not only in understanding the differences in approach to content by mainstream media constructs but would also help us understand if UK mainstream media’s marginal coverage of the sector is an anomaly or if this is reflective of all countries where esports is experiencing growth. A correlation could be sought between those countries with mainstream media coverage and the popularity or otherwise amongst the general public in esports in order to evaluate what role mainstream media plays in creating sustainability for a new sector. A key nation for this investigation is South Korea. As previously noted (p.58), the country has dedicated television channels for esports, and the sector is regarded as an essential component of its GDP.

One of the interesting discoveries for me as a former journalist has been the differences between the newspapers and the broadcasters in the UK in terms of coverage and the difficulty this presents when using the term ‘mainstream media’ to describe them all as if one homogenised group. Not all newspapers treat esports the same for example and not all esports are covered equally. A further study at a more granular level is needed to understand which esports titles the publishers are covering. With a focus on *FIFA Series* what this study didn’t show is other esports titles being covered by the publishers. Researchers could question whether the publishers with a significant amount of sports content are only covering simulated sports titles or whether they are covering other genres of esports such as multiplayer online battle arena video game: *League of Legends*, for example. This would provide further insight into the differentiated approach to content by newspapers and broadcasters in the UK.

Of equal interest is the differences in approach to journalism within endemic esports publications compared to ‘mainstream media’. The interviews conducted with the esports journalists provided a rich source of qualitative data that gave insight into covering this sector which I was able to compare with my own lived experiences as a journalist. An additional study could expand upon the interviews conducted with esports journalists by including an equivalent number of mainstream journalists for comparison. This would enable an examination of the experiences and working practices in mainstream newspapers versus endemic esports publications. Findings indicate potentially fundamental differences in working practices, warranting further investigation.

This study has elucidated the importance of training, not merely in executing journalistic tasks, but in understanding the role of journalists within society and comprehending the power of the profession. In the current UK political climate, safeguarding the rights to independent reporting for societal benefit is crucial. However, without adequate training individuals engaged in the practice of journalism may lack an understanding of these rights and remain susceptible to exploitation. Based on the findings it is my conclusion that in the UK unions have a significant role to play in preserving the legacy of journalistic independence.

This advocacy for unions and for formalised journalism training has emerged as an unexpected development for me. As a working journalist, I took the rigorous on-the-job training I received for granted. The lessons I acquired during my initial job at a local newspaper have remained with me. News editors and stringent sub-editors instilled in me the significance of adhering to an editorial code of practice, unbiased and independent reporting, complying with the 'house style,' and operating within the boundaries of media law. All of which I later passed on to my students along with a requirement to apply for student press cards which necessitated joining one of the unions. But I did not give much thought to union membership or press card application at the time nor later as programme director for Journalism at London South Bank University. Although I recall the excitement of receiving my first press card, which solidified my identity as a journalist, I accepted this step without scrutiny. This study's findings have led me to reconsider the importance of the press card which is officially recognised by the police (and ergo the role of the unions) as a crucial component in acknowledging my role as a professional journalist and giving me the confidence (and permission) to report. All of which is absent in the experience of esports journalists interviewed for this research who have not had the benefit of formalised training.

This underlines another limitation with this study. There is a lack of explicit examination of the role of the National Union of Journalists or the British Association of Journalists within esports journalism. Considering the findings that the esports journalists don’t identify with the term journalist in describing what they do, the research could have been enriched by specifically investigating press card possession across various journalism genres, including esports. Probing the unions and assessing their awareness of esports as a journalism genre would have been equally valuable, as would addressing pay discrepancies across different sectors to re-evaluate previous studies concerning news hierarchies and publishing mediums. Furthermore, given that training was identified as a significant distinction between mainstream and esports journalists, audits of the courses accredited by the National Training Council of Journalists and the Broadcast Journalism Training Council, on behalf of industry, are essential to guarantee the implementation of professional training strategies for all journalists, regardless of genre or medium.

For further research I am interested to explore connections between the scarcity of use of the terms ‘journalism’ and ‘journalist’ in esports both in academic research and with esports media, and the waning interest in journalism as a subject of study at degree level that the UK is currently experiencing. Numerous journalism courses are facing challenges in attracting new students, leading to several closures. For example, the course at London South Bank University which I previously referred to, is in its final year. From September 2024, the university will no longer offer journalism courses. Although this is a representative example, it is not an isolated incident. Based on the findings from this study and my experience as an educator, my hypothesis is that the demographic that typifies the esports sector, 16 – 35-year-olds (Statista, 2023), are not resonating with the term ‘journalist’. Instead, they identify with roles such as content creators, producers, writers, and editors, but not as journalists and are therefore not attract by journalism courses. The concern instigated by the findings is if the term journalist no longer holds resonance. how is the profession to be safeguarded over the long-term. This requires further study.

At the outset of this research project, the focus on mainstream media coverage of esports was not a primary concern of industry, as the prevalent assumption within the sector was that newspapers and broadcasters were not integral to the success of esports. Although the discourse has evolved, partly due to a variety of conferences where I have presented my findings (Filotrani, 2019a; 2019b; 2020a; 2020b; 2021a), the crucial role mainstream media can play in elevating the profile of the esports sector in the UK remains to be fully recognised. This is perhaps best exemplified by a discussion in March 2023 of UKie’s[[27]](#footnote-28) report, *Opportunities and Challenges for esports in the UK[[28]](#footnote-29)* (UKie, 2023). Authored by Dom Sacco, one of the esports journalists interviewed for this study, the report highlights a central topic of conversation among the panellists, which is the pressing need to educate the general public about the esports industry. However, mainstream media is not recognised as a means to achieve this goal, and within the 90-minute discussion, there is no mention of the role that journalists or journalism can contribute to securing the future of esports in the UK. It is my hope that this study helps in re-evaluating the significance of mainstream media in this effort.

Appendices

1. Participation Information Sheet and Consent Form







1. List of Interviewees

* BRANDON SMITH 07/04/19
* ROB BLACK 10/04/19
* JACK STEWART 25/07/19
* TREVOR KEANE 10/08/19
* ADAM FITCH 08/07/20
* MIKE STUBBS 22/07/20
* CHRIS TROUT 08/07/20
* DOM SACCO 08/07/20
* GRAHAM ASHTON 10/07/20
* TRENT MURRAY 3/12/20
* CALLUM PATTERSON 04/12/20
* NATHAN BLISS 11/03/21

1. Breakdown by segment of opening programmes of the ‘ePremier League’ Finals 2019 and 2021 (first 45 mins)

Chart, radar chart, sunburst chart

Description automatically generated

2019

Source: Filotrani, 2021

2021

1. Difference in market share YouTube/Twitch, 2019/2021

|  |
| --- |
| Finals 2019  Chart, line chart  Description automatically generated  *Source: Filotrani, 2021*  *This chart shows the pattern of concurrent viewers from 2pm till the close of the stream recorded during the live ‘ePremier League’ Finals in 2019 on Twitch (orange line) and YouTube (blue line). The two drops on Day 1 on Twitch mark the times the stream went down. Both unscheduled breaks in the stream.* |

|  |
| --- |
| Finals 2021  Chart  Description automatically generated  Source: Filotrani, 2021  *This chart shows the pattern of concurrent viewers recorded from 2pm to the close of the stream (8pm on days 1 and 2 and 10pm on day 3) during the live ‘ePremier League’ Finals in 2021 on Twitch (orange and purple line) and YouTube (blue and green line)* |

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1. The Associated Press is a news agency which syndicates content to publishers world-wide. It produces a styleguide each year for publishers which is widely recognised as the industry standard. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. *The esports Observer* no longer exists as a standalone website. The news and features site was fully integrated with the *Sports Business Journal* in 2021. Archival content for *the esports Observer* can be found at sportsbusinessjournal.com/Esports. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. <https://www.ijesports.org/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. <https://www.igi-global.com/journal/international-journal-esports-research/250425> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. <https://esportsresearch.net/> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Broadcasters Audience Research Board (BARB), was formed in 1981 and is responsible for monitoring and reporting the UK’s television audience ratings [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Caster is the diminutive of the word Shoutcaster – used to describe the person providing commentary on a live esports match [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. https://pro.eslgaming.com/tour/csgo/10th-anniversary/fun-facts/ [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Caster is the diminutive of the word Shoutcaster – used to describe the person providing commentary on a live esports match [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. The Association for the Continuing Education in esports (ACES) 2019 - 2022. A consortium of academics in the UK. The key aims included: establishing a framework for curricula in esports at HE, identifying industry needs and skills matching with research and innovation projects, creating a network of esports educators. ACES is not active currently. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. *The esports Observer* has now integrated with the *Sports Business Journal* (SBJ) (as of Nov, 2021). SBJ is owned by American City Business Journals (a division of Advance Publications, owner of Conde Nast Publications) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. According to its website *gamurs.group* - GAMURS is the leading esports media network with 37m active users [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. UKie census 2020 <https://ukie.org.uk/resources/uk-games-industry-census-2021>. Ukie is the “trade association for the UK's games and interactive entertainment industry”. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Newzoo https://newzoo.com/insights/rankings/top-games-twitch/ [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Codes of practice published by the National Union of Journalists and the Independent Press Standards Organisation are very clear on the obligations of journalists to be able to distinguish between fact, opinion and comment.

    NUJ (2011) NUJ Code of Conduct. https://www.nuj.org.uk/ about/nuj-code

    IPSO (2016) The Editors’ Code of Practice. https://www.ipso. co.uk/IPSO/cop.html [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. The NCTJ is regulated by Ofqual, CCEA and Qualifications Wales to deliver industry standard qualifications for journalists throughout the UK. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. http://www.londonfreelance.org/rates/index.php [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. (<https://www.similarweb.com>, 2022) [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. I received a copy of this document on 21/03/2022 from one of the production team working for Gfinity at the time. He gave me permission to use the document as he handed out 100s of paper copies of this document to the Clubs and it does not contain any personal or sensitive data. He did however request to remain anonymous. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. IRC stands for internet relay chat – a text-based chat system which allows users to communicate with each other in real time. Both YouTube and Twitch have chat boxes allowing for continuous comment as a stream is live. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. According to esportscharts, *League of Legends* was the most watched esports title in 2021 with more than 664.16 million hours watched. The number two title was CS:GO, which accumulated 410.81 million. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. NBA2k is a sports-simulated basketball game created by publishers 2k, part of Take Two Interactive Inc. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Blizzard Entertainment Inc is one of the biggest video game developers in the world and is the creator of two of the most popular esports titles globally, World of Warcraft and Overwatch. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. https://twitchstats.net/all-time-views/2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. *Monday Night Football* has been a feature programme for Sky Sports since 1992 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. See ESL press release https://about.eslgaming.com/blog/2017/03/intel-and-esl-welcome-173000-fans-at-worlds-biggest-esports-event-in-history/ [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. Ukie is the trade body for the UK games and interactive entertainment industry. With over 600 members. https://ukie.org.uk/ [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. At the time of writing this report had not been published [↑](#footnote-ref-29)