

## **Rumours, responsibility and sports journalism ethics. The coverage of Ye Shiwen at the London 2012 Olympics in the British, American and Spanish quality press**

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### **Abstract**

At the London 2012 Olympics, the Chinese swimmer Ye Shiwen achieved a remarkable milestone, winning the gold medal in the 400 m individual medley. However, *The Guardian* became the first medium to give voice to a senior American coach, John Leonard, who cast doubts on her performance. The subsequent doping controversy posed key ethical challenges referring to 1) the use of rumour in sports journalism; 2) the selection and balancing of sources, and 3) the confrontation between freedom of expression and the social responsibility of the media. By triangulation of the qualitative content analysis technique and semi-structured interviews, this article explores Shiwen's portrayal in six quality newspapers: *The Guardian* / *The Telegraph* (United Kingdom); *The New York Times* / *The Washington Post* (United States); and *El País* / *La Vanguardia* (Spain). The research also examines the media compliance with the major national and transnational codes of journalism ethics.

KEYWORDS: London 2012 Olympics, journalism ethics, rumours, responsibility, sources.

## **Rumors, responsabilitat i ètica en el periodisme esportiu. La cobertura de Ye Shiwen als Jocs Olímpics de Londres 2012 a la premsa de qualitat britànica, americana i espanyola**

### **Resum**

En els Jocs Olímpics de Londres 2012, la nedadora xinesa Ye Shiwen va assolir una fita remarcable, guanyant la medalla d'or en els 400 m combinats. Malgrat això, *The Guardian* va ser el primer mitjà a donar veu a un entrenador sènior nord-americà, John Leonard, que va emetre dubtes sobre el seu rendiment. La posterior controvèrsia sobre dopatge va plantejar desafiaments ètics referits a: 1) l'ús del rumor en el periodisme esportiu, 2) la selecció i l'equilibri de les fonts informatives i 3) la confrontació entre la llibertat d'expressió i la responsabilitat social dels mitjans. A través de la triangulació de l'anàlisi del contingut qualitativa i d'entrevistes semiestructurades, l'article explora la representació de Shiwen en sis diaris de qualitat: *The Guardian / The Telegraph* (Regne Unit); *The New York Times / The Washington Post* (Estats Units), i *El País / La Vanguardia* (Espanya). La recerca també examina el compliment per part dels mitjans dels principals codis nacionals i transnacionals d'ètica periodística.

PARAULES CLAU: Jocs Olímpics de Londres 2012, ètica periodística, rumors, responsabilitat, fonts.

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### **Introduction**

As essential players in the configuration of the public agenda and in the transmission of information and values in democratic societies (Hardy, 2008), conscientious media should provide complete and responsible coverage of all the areas of the news arena, including sports. Freedom of expression must be weighed against the preservation of the key principles of journalism ethics: truth, justice and responsibility (Alsius, 2010; Christians *et al.*, 2009; Frost, 2011).

Nevertheless, sports journalism has been traditionally associated with major ethical issues, such as dissolution of the line between information and opinion; lack of rigour; sensationalism; poor criteria in the selection of news; incitation to violence; sexism; or low quality and little variety of sources (Oates and Pauly, 2007; Rojas Torrijos, 2011; Rowe, 2007). As a consequence, sports journalism "has been traditionally viewed disparagingly as the 'toy department', a bastion of easy living, sloppy journalism and 'soft' news" (Boyle, 2006: 1).

To counteract these shortcomings, sports journalists need to gain awareness of their accountability (Wulfemeyer, 1985) and accept that "sports journalism

should not be exempted from scrutiny regarding conventional criteria within the news arena” (Rowe, 2007: 385). This is particularly relevant at the Olympic Games since they are the most prestigious international sporting mega-event and in a short period of time they receive intensive media coverage on a global scale (Hutchins and Rowe, 2012). To be precise, the 2012 Olympics registered an audience of 4.8 billion people (IOC, 2012). Taking into consideration their paramount importance, it is crucial that the Olympics should be covered in the most comprehensive and ethical way as possible. This is especially so if we bear in mind that they embrace core values such as respect, antidiscrimination, understanding, justice, multiculturalism, universality and peace (Naul, 2008).

Through the academic lens, certain ethical aspects of sports journalism coverage have been extensively analysed, especially the quantitative and qualitative treatment of gender, race and nationality (Boyle and Haynes, 2009; Hundley and Billings, 2010), issues connected with the deontological principle of justice. However, the lesser amount of research conducted on other key aspects indicates that new investigations should analyse the task carried out by the international quality press, in order to discern if they comply with the essential principles of ethics and excellence of information when disseminating sports information.

More precisely, this study has focused on examining the coverage received by the Chinese swimmer Ye Shiwen during the London 2012 Olympics. Shiwen achieved a remarkable milestone by winning the gold medal in the 400 m individual medley, and two days later, the gold medal in the 200 m event. However, *The Guardian* gave voice to an American coach, John Leonard, who cast doubts on her performance. By triangulation of the qualitative content analysis technique and semi-structured interviews, this paper explores Shiwen’s portrayal in six quality newspapers.

## **Sports journalism ethics and quality of information**

### ***Journalism ethics***

We understand journalism ethics as “the moral principles, reflected in rules, written or unwritten, which prescribe how journalists should work to avoid harming or distressing others” (Franklin *et al.*, 2005: 74). Journalists should have a “moral compass” (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001: 181), that is, a sense of ethics and a responsible behaviour in carrying out their professional practice (Alsius, 1999; Aznar, 2005; Deuze, 2005; Sanders, 2003). To generate high-quality content, journalists should follow the considerations established in the main deontological principles: truth, justice and responsibility (Alsius, 2010).

### *The deontological principle of truth*

From the professional point of view, “journalism’s first obligation is to the truth” (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001: 12). The essential character of truth in journalistic practice (Alsius, 2010; Deuze, 2005; Frost, 2011; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001; Plaisance, 2009) has been widely documented in the ethical codes. Illustrative cases may be found in UNESCO’s International Principles of Professional Ethics in Journalism (Art. 1-2); the Declaration of Principles of the International Federation of Journalists (Art. 1); Resolution 1003 of the Council of Europe (Art. 4); NUJ’s Code of Conduct (Art. 2); SPJ’s Code of Ethics (Art. 1); ASNE’s Statement of Principles (Art. 4); and FAPE’s Deontological Code of the Journalistic Profession (Art. 2-3). In this research, the main focus is placed on *a*) speculations and rumours; *b*) sources, and *c*) contextualising and elaborating on information.

#### *A. Speculations, conjectures and rumours*

Major ethical documents (IFJ, Art. 3; Council of Europe, Art. 4; FAPE, Art. 17) make explicit references to avoiding conjectures and rumours. Nevertheless, one should be aware that “comment and often speculation are increasingly a central aspect of contemporary sports journalism” (Boyle, 2006: 93). Speculative reporting is one of the most widely used sources in sports journalism and sometimes it is difficult to distinguish whether a rumour is true or simply interested information (Alcoba, 1993).

#### *B. Sources in sports journalism*

Sources have been extensively considered in the deontological codes (FAPE, Art. 13; SPJ, Art.1; ASNE, Art. 6; APSE, Art. 6). Quality media need to have an extensive range of representative, authoritative and trustworthy sources that provide genuine information (Frost, 2011). As Rojas Torrijos (2011: 142) acknowledges, “the larger the number of sources used, the more truthful and credible should be the information obtained”. As Garrison and Sabljak (1993: 40) explain, “a reporter must use a wide range of sources on most stories to get the complete picture of what has occurred, or is occurring. Pieces cannot be under-resourced, because a single perspective can present a warped or biased point of view”.

#### *C. Contextualising and elaborating on information*

The right of citizens to receive comprehensive and contextualised information about the social reality is expressed in the codes promoted by UNESCO

(Art. 1-2), the IFJ (Art. 1), the Council of Europe (Art. 17), the SPJ (Preamble) and the ASNE (Art. 4). In the case of sports, the role of journalists should be “to place athletic performances within broader contexts in order to enhance the overall understanding of sport” (Billings, 2008: 56).

### ***The deontological principle of justice***

Justice is another “crucial component of journalistic conscientiousness” (Spence and Quinn, 2008: 275). The major ethical recommendations (UNESCO, Art. 9; IFJ, Art. 7; Council of Europe, Art. 33; SPJ, Art. 1; IPSO, Art. 12; NUJ, Art. 9; FAPE, Art. 7) are unequivocal about the avoidance of discrimination and stereotyping on the basis of such aspects as race, gender, nationality or disability. However, in sports media, social groups such as sportswomen or athletes from certain countries are subject to a “distorted representation” (Alsus, 1999: 201). This situation is worrying, considering that media-covered sports are a crucial space in which individual and group identities and attitudes are shaped, legitimised and conveyed to the public (Billings *et al.*, 2014).

### ***The deontological principle of responsibility***

Freedom of expression must be conjugated with responsibility (Sanders, 2003), as is clearly stated in the codes promoted by UNESCO (Art. 3), the Council of Europe (Art. 1) and the ASNE (Art. 1). Sports media should consider the inherent positive values of sport practice and their beneficial influence on society as a whole. According to Moragas (1996: 9), “modern sport will only be able to fulfil its educational responsibilities if the media make a valid contribution to the strengthening of its positive values and avoid highlighting the negative ones”. It is true that the Olympics are “largely interpreted as competitions between nations” (Billings *et al.*, 2014: 163), but media have the “responsibility to reflect the values of international peace and understanding inherent to the Olympic Movement” (Moragas, 1996: 12).

## **Objectives and methodology**

Taking the aforementioned framework into account, the objective of this paper is to answer the following research question: to what extent did the British, American and Spanish quality newspapers comply, in their coverage of Ye Shiwen at London 2012, with the deontological principles of truth, justice and responsibility?

The research has employed the qualitative content analysis technique (Altheide, 1996; Bryman, 2012). The sample has been chosen in a non-probabilistic way (Ruiz Olabuénaga *et al.*, 1998) by the researcher, who has purposively selected six general-information newspapers in their print versions, which operate at the “quality end” of the market in three countries: the United Kingdom, the United States, and Spain. They have been selected considering strategic criteria such as their quality, tone and readers; their relevance in their communication systems; their wide circulation; and their capacity to carry out “systematic, insightful and rigorous sports journalism” (Boyle, 2006: 10).

*The Guardian* is one of the most respected newspapers in the United Kingdom for its trustworthiness and plurality of expression. *The Daily Telegraph* is currently consolidated as the best-selling quality newspaper in the country. *The New York Times* is “generally regarded as the most respected US news medium” (Dearing and Rogers, 1996: 32) and it is definitely one of the high-status outlets that set the public and media agendas worldwide (McCombs, 2004). *The Washington Post* is also one of the most prominent American newspapers. *El País* is the most prestigious, widely read and best-selling print newspaper in Spain. Lastly, the Barcelona-based *La Vanguardia* is another leading outlet within the Spanish communication landscape. Within the framework of these newspapers, the object of study has been the information that made reference to Ye Shiwen during the London Olympics.

The empirical observation has been triangulated (Hesse-Biber, 2010) with semi-structured interviews with scholars and professionals. The sample of face-to-face interviews, which were conducted between October 2013 and July 2014, included the following interviewees: Raymond Boyle (University of Glasgow), Andrew C. Billings and Shuhua Zhou (University of Alabama), Chris Frost (Liverpool John Moores University), Ian Prior (*The Guardian*’s sports editor), José Sámano (*El País*’s sports editor), and Mark Adams (IOC’s communication director).

## Results

### *Newspapers’ initial reaction to Shiwen’s triumph*

On Saturday July 28, 2012, Ye Shiwen won the Olympic gold medal in the 400 m individual medley, achieving a world-record time of 4 minutes and 28.43 seconds. In her last 50 m, she attained a faster time than the American Ryan Lochte, who had won the men’s 400 m medley event.

In the two days after the event (July 29-30, 2012), the attention devoted to the issue by the sampled newspapers was not uniform but, in broad terms, it can

be said that *The Telegraph*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *El País* and *La Vanguardia* highlighted the value of Shiwen's achievement, without casting any doubt on the fairness of her accomplishment. In *The Sunday Telegraph*, White (2012a: S4-S5) wrote that "Ye delivered an astonishing performance", which represented "another imposing demonstration of China's increasing power in the pool". *The New York Times* used expressions such as "Ye won in grand style" or "Ye found speed to which no other woman in the water could relate" (Clarey, 2012: D1, D5) to convey a positive image of her triumph. *The Washington Post* (2012: B9) quoted Ryan Lochte, who highlighted the extraordinary nature of her performance ("That's pretty impressive. She's fast. If she had been right there with me, she might have beaten me.").

Regarding the Spanish outlets, Martínez (2012a: 41) reported in *La Vanguardia* that Shiwen "completed an impressive sprint" and "proved that a woman can swim faster than a man in the Olympic elite". In *El País*, Torres (2012a: 54) highlighted that Shiwen "was out of the ordinary" and that she "pulverised a world record that dated back to the epoch of polyurethane bathing suits: the 4 minutes 29.45 seconds of Stephanie Rice in 2008". Also, in the article "Una entre 1.300 millones", Torres (2012b: 50) did a significant job in contextualising the situation of sport in China and explaining the improvements in Chinese elite swimming since Beijing was designated to host the 2008 Olympics. As a complementary piece, *El País* included the opinion of Sergi López (2012: 50), bronze medallist in Seoul 1988, who positively valued Shiwen's accomplishments and compared her time to the situation of an overwhelming victory of F.C. Barcelona over Real Madrid or vice versa.

In contrast to the attention devoted by the aforementioned newspapers, in *The Guardian* Ye Shiwen was only briefly mentioned on July 29 and July 30 in the list of results (*The Observer*, 2012: 16) and in an article focused on the British swimmer Rebecca Adlington (Adley, 2012a: 2).

### **The Guardian gives excessive weight to John Leonard's voice**

However, with the article "China's record win in pool 'suspicious', says top coach" (Bull and Gibson, 2012: 1-3), which appeared on the front page of the newspaper on July 31, *The Guardian* became the first medium to include the voice of John Leonard, whose opinion of Shiwen hit the global headlines. Leonard, a senior American coach and executive director of the World Swimming Coaches Association, suggested that her performance was "suspicious", "unbelievable" and "disturbing". Leonard was particularly sceptical about the dramatic improvement that Shiwen had experienced since the 2011 World Championships (more than seven seconds faster).

In particular, the time she registered in her last 100 m was not possible from Leonard's standpoint: "The final 100 m was impossible. Flat out. If all her split times had been faster I don't think anybody would be calling it into question, because she is a good swimmer. But to swim three other splits at the rate that she did, which was quite ordinary for elite competition, and then unleash a historic anomaly, it is just not right."

Leonard explicitly said that he wanted "to be very careful about calling it doping". Nevertheless, the American coach cast the rumour by relating Shiwen's performance to past doping cases. He explained that "it brought back 'a lot of awful memories' of the Irish swimmer Michelle Smith's race in the same event at the Atlanta Olympics in 1996", who was "banned for four years in 1998 for tampering with a urine sample". It is very enlightening to look at the quotes that *The Guardian* included from the interview with Leonard: "The one thing I will say is that history in our sport will tell you that every time we see something, and I will put quotation marks around this, 'unbelievable', history shows us that it turns out later on there was doping involved. That last 100 m was reminiscent of some old East German swimmers, for people who have been around a while. It was reminiscent of the 400 m individual medley by a young Irish woman in Atlanta [...] Any time someone has looked like superwoman in the history of our sport they have later been found guilty of doping."

Leonard went further, associating doping with the Chinese nationality and highlighting that in 2009 five junior Chinese swimmers were banned after testing positive for the anabolic agent clenbuterol at the 2008 national junior championships: "You can't turn around and call it racism to say the Chinese have a doping history [...] That is just history. That's fact. Does that make us suspicious? Of course."

From the perspective of journalism ethics, as it will be argued afterwards, the problem is that, in this prominent article, *The Guardian* gave excessive weight to John Leonard's unfounded accusations and didn't properly balance his perspective, as quotes from other sources were minimised in space. Ye Shiwen stated that the Chinese athletes kept "very firmly to the anti-doping policies". Arne Ljungqvist, chairman of the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) Medical Commission, said that he had no particular suspicions. Other sources such as IOC's president, Jacques Rogge, or Jeremy Hunt (at that time the British culture secretary), pointed out that any athlete who would incur in doping would be caught and sanctioned.

We cannot avoid mentioning that, on the same day, Bull (2012: 5) stated in a complementary analysis article that "Ye did not come from nowhere", highlighting that "she won the 200 m IM title at the 2011 World Championships". However, Bull gave Leonard a high degree of credibility, emphasising his ex-



expertise and “enormous integrity” on anti-doping issues. Moreover, he used as a single source Ross Tucker, a sports scientist who also adopted a sceptical tone about Shiwen’s performance.

### *The inclusion of other voices to counterbalance Leonard’s words*

As part of their duty to contextualise Leonard’s comments, the sampled media echoed his words, but also presented “a large group of viewpoints that quickly showed that there was no evidence towards it” (Mark Adams, interview, May 2014).

Before Shiwen had even achieved her second medal in the 200 m on July 31, 2012, Jeré Longman of *The New York Times* pointed out that the public scepticism that Shiwen received was unfair. Longman (2012: A1, B11) claimed that there was no proof against her achievement: “There is nothing to indicate that she is anything more than a great swimmer from a country that holds about a fifth of the world’s population, a teenager who relies on the latest scientific training and the kind of adolescent certainty that makes her unaware of any limitations. The Chinese have pledged to obey the rules. And Ye dismissed any concerns about doping.” Similarly, although *The Daily Telegraph* included large excerpts from Leonard’s words, it reminded readers that Ye “had never failed a drugs test” (Wilson, 2012: 7).

The day after Shiwen’s second gold medal, more articles came out in her defence. In the editorial “Héroes y contaminación”, *El País*’s sports editor José Sámano (2012: 41) stated that the rumours were “interested” and explicitly criticised Leonard’s attitude: “Shiwen’s race astonished the world, a huge achievement. Immediately, far from accepting the feat, the American John Leonard, president of the coaches association, expressed his worry and raised the suspicions. He didn’t have any other indication than a sidereal mark. The Chinese don’t have the shelter of the big propagandistic machinery of the United States that, as well as China, is not alien to the blight of doping.” Sámano concluded that to determine if Shiwen was clean was a mission of the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA): “Leonard doesn’t have any authority about it, but the responsibility of not tarnishing [Shiwen’s reputation] ahead of time.”

Focusing specifically on the second gold medal, in *La Vanguardia* Juan Bautista Martínez (2012b: 35) also used a tone favourable to Shiwen’s innocence: “Against those who are engaged in boosting suspicions, another gold. Against those who doubt the honesty of her marks, another exhibition [...] Her end turned out to be demolishing again and allowed her to pulverise the Olympic record. Now people can keep on talking. Until the contrary is proved, her success is the result of talent and work.”

The views of the core staff from the newspapers were accompanied by the use of a wide range of authoritative sources. For instance, *The New York Times* featured the viewpoints of the swimmers David Sharpe (Canada), Natalie Coughlin (USA), Stephanie Rice (Australia) and Michael Phelps (USA), who used adjectives such as “interesting”, “pretty impressive” or “phenomenal”, but none of them accused Shiwen of using illegal substances. The swimmer Caitlin Leverenz, after Ye’s second gold medal, highlighted that “Shiwen had proven that it was possible to swim her final 50 meters faster than Ryan Lochte” (Das, 2012: B15). The same outlet also gave voice to Frank Busch (national team director for USA Swimming) and the Chinese swimmer Lu Ying (silver medal in the women’s 100 m butterfly), who argued that Shiwen’s talented nature, hard work and training were decisive factors that should be considered.

Similarly, *The Daily Telegraph* displayed a series of quotes in favour of Shiwen in the articles “Ye ignores her critics to strike gold yet again” (White, 2012b: S8-S9) and “Support for teenager in doping row as she wins again” (Kelso, 2012: 2). Those articles included the views of Colin Moynihan, chairman of the British Olympic Association (“Shiwen has been through the World Anti-Doping Agency programme and she’s clean. That’s the end of the story.”); Sebastian Coe, chairman of the London Organising Committee (“You have to be very careful jumping to the conclusion that a great breakthrough in sport is down to anything other than great coaching, hard work and formidable talent.”); Bill Bowman, Michael Phelps’ coach (“It is unfair to immediately jump on someone who has had an extraordinary swim because it is something that happens [...] she is beautiful technically and she is swimming well.”); the US coach Dave Marsh (“She obviously did some incredible sets and workout.”); the Seoul 1988 gold medallist Adrian Moorhouse (“Ye Shiwen is no overnight sensation as she won gold at the World Championships last year.”); or Xu Qi, head of the Chinese team (“Shiwen has been seen as a genius since she was young, and her performance vindicates that.”), among others.

Likewise, *La Vanguardia* recalled the words of César Cielo, Beijing 2008 gold medallist (“There is nothing suspicious, no way, it is obviously talent”) (Martínez, 2012b: 35). Another illustrative reaction to the rumours can be found at *El País*’s article “Cuarenta años hacia atrás”, where the former swimmer Santiago Esteva (2012: 42-43) compared the superiority of Shiwen to Mark Spitz and Roland Matthes.

### ***The situation at The Guardian after Shiwen’s second gold medal***

It should be underlined that after Shiwen’s second gold medal, *The Guardian*’s portrayal of the swimmer also became more balanced, due not only to the

positive evaluation conveyed by its reporters but also to the inclusion of sources such as a British coach working with the Chinese team and representatives from WADA and FINA (Fédération Internationale de Natation).

In the article “Eyes of the world on her - but China’s prodigy wins gold again”, Adley (2012*b*) praised her concentration, hard work and commitment. The article “These athletes train harder than anyone” (*The Guardian*, 2012, 2-3) pivoted on the contribution of a British swimming coach working with the Chinese team (whose identity was not published but was verified by the newspaper). His contribution was essential for *The Guardian*’s readers to contextualise the success of Shiwen, to understand the environment in which Chinese elite athletes train and to go in-depth into the resources and funding available in the country for training. As the author pointed out, Chinese athletes are hard workers, “are proud to represent China and have a very team-focused mentality” and participate in sport as it is their “only avenue for income”. In addition, the coach highlighted other factors to explain the Chinese success, such as the unlimited access to training facilities and the availability of economic resources.

In the article “Swimmer defended”, Booth and Branigan (2012: 6) reflected on the statement released by FINA on Shiwen, which remarked that she had “fulfilled all of the FINA doping control obligations, having been tested on four occasions in the last 12 months”. The authors also pinpointed that the athlete had passed the doping test carried out by WADA.

Nevertheless, explicit comments criticising Leonard did not appear in the outlet until the former athlete Dan Macey published the article “I am sick of the insinuations made about outstanding gold medal winners like Ye”. As Macey (2012: 4) argued: “Is it fair to cast aspersions over an athlete’s performance simply because he or she achieves something brilliant? I don’t think so. To my mind anyone who insinuates that an athlete is on drugs is wrongly damaging the sport [...] I thought what he said was disgusting. He ruined her moment of glory and forever after she will be tainted by his words.”

## Discussion

*The Guardian* did a remarkable job by making John Leonard appear “on the record”. As Raymond Boyle points out, the newspaper was clever in its perspective, using the adjective “suspicious” in quotes and avoiding in the headline words like “cheating” or “exclusive”, as a tabloid newspaper would have done (interview, October 2013). The newspaper’s objective was to debate a crucial issue — performance-enhancing substances in high-level competition — and arguably it would have been worse to not have covered the story. Boyle sustains that “traditionally there has been a criticism that sports writers had been com-

placent with doping”. In other words, journalists have spent years not talking about doping when they knew that it was happening and they didn’t raise the debate. As Boyle highlights, debating about doping “brings critical distance and adds value to the coverage as it helps to broaden the readers’ knowledge and understanding” (interview, October 2013).

Chris Frost underlines that “there are a whole range of things that aren’t going so well, which people ought to know about, such as drug taking”. Frost argues that citizens should know much more about doping. However, he suspects that a number of journalists (especially those who are not in the senior posts) “put off doing that kind of reporting, because they would see that they would not get anywhere with those types of stories and would lose their potential to work because their access might be denied” (interview, October 2013).

It is undeniable that sports journalism’s purpose should be “to critically examine sports, from the play to the politics behind the play” (King, 2008: 341). Therefore, to raise the public debate about potential malpractices in sport and doping in particular is essential, especially if we consider that the fight against doping “has been one of the defining features of contemporary Olympic competition” (Miah and García, 2012: 96).

Ian Prior, *The Guardian*’s sports editor, justified the newspaper’s selection of the story and the adequacy of Leonard as a source: “We were the ones that broke the story, which made the global headlines. We included the voice of the most senior coach in America. Sometimes it is about getting to the right people first. He wasn’t actually at the Olympics, but he is one of the world’s greatest experts on swimming. It was a story that reverberated around the world, in *The New York Times*, and it also was a huge story in Asia.” (Ian Prior, interview, October 2013)

Nevertheless, from the perspective of ethics and quality of information, there shouldn’t be space for rumour in sports journalism, as sports editor of *El País* José Sámano points out. Regarding Shiwen’s case, Sámano explains why he decided to write the editorial “Héroes y contaminación” criticising the issue: “Against rumours, ethics is very clear. It happens that sometimes rumours make so much noise that you cannot walk away. In that case, I decided to write this article and criticise it because in any case, civil or criminal, if there is evidence, go ahead. However, I did not find it ethical at all that the suspicion was based, in quotes, on the fact that she was ‘Chinese’. That girl passed the controls like the rest.” (José Sámano, interview, May 2014)

From a similar perspective, Shuhua Zhou underlines the consequences of spreading rumours: “I was a journalist and if you don’t have verified information, my perception is not to report it. It is true that there were cases where the Chinese swimming team had drug-tested positive. But when a journalist reports

something that is unverified, it also helps to spread the rumour, and a journalist's job is not to help to spread rumours. Accusations are best handled by the disciplinary bodies of sport. If the person does not prove guilty, then we are doing damage to that person.” (Shuhua Zhou, interview, July 2014)

Therefore, the fact that *The Guardian* published Leonard's words, whose opinions were based on unproved insinuations, generated a doping controversy. With this approach, which led to the dissemination of unsubstantiated speculations, the British newspaper didn't comply with the prescriptions promoted by the International Federation of Journalists (Art. 3) and the Council of Europe (Art. 4). Thus, the general recommendations regarding the truth in journalism practice (such as UNESCO's Art. 1-2; IFJ's Art. 1; Council of Europe's Art. 4 or NUJ's Art. 2) were also affected.

It wouldn't be fair to judge *The Guardian's* coverage based solely on the article “China's record win in pool ‘suspicious’, says top coach” because, as has already been mentioned, the newspaper articulated different voices afterwards. Nevertheless, *The Guardian* should have been more careful to weigh Leonard's opinions against other relevant viewpoints much earlier, before propelling the issue onto the front page of the newspaper. To pose questions on doping might be necessary, but having a wide range of top experts and sporting actors who can reflect on them from the beginning is essential. What is more, by labelling this controversy with a certain nationality, the issue also affected the principles of justice and responsibility. Treating Chinese athletes as suspicious based on past experiences helped to reinforce and amplify negative stereotypes, contravening the major ethical standards signalled by international bodies (UNESCO, Art. 9; IFJ, Art. 7; Council of Europe, Art. 33) and national organisations (such as IPSO, Art. 12; or NUJ, Art. 9). The dissemination of those stereotypes is also detrimental to the values of justice, equality and antidiscrimination clearly stated in the Olympic Charter (Art. 6) and the IOC Code of Ethics (Art. A.1 and A.2).

According to Billings, her coverage would have been different in the Western media if she had not been Chinese: “They did not give the benefit of the doubt partly because of the nation she is from. I do think that if she was from a European nation or from the US, the media would have said ‘what a tremendous performance’, ‘we have never seen anything like this’. Whereas because she is from China, because China has not traditionally been a swimming superpower and because she actually performed at a level that was hard to explain, then all of the sudden you have a hook to look for something else there. People were certainly more likely to embrace that.” (Andrew Billings, interview, July 2014)

In addition, the media's judgement of the legitimacy of Shiwen's triumphs before any sports authority could have declared her guilty was detrimental to

the presumption of innocence established in Resolution 1003 of the Council of Europe (Art. 22).

Regarding the principle of responsibility, the association of negative values with spreading rumours about Chinese athletes helped to emphasise prejudicial rivalries between countries. This contrasts with the values of peace and international understanding highlighted in the Olympic Charter (Art. 2). This can be illustrated in the articles “Shame and indignation in China as its Olympians come under fire” (Jacobs, 2012: B12) and “Conspiracy theories are afoot in China” (Wan, 2012: D12), written respectively by *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* correspondents in Beijing, Andrew Jacobs and William Wan. *The New York Times* explained that the rumours cast on Shiwen “snowballed into a gargantuan national insult” in China. The Chinese state media and news-wire services, including *People’s Daily*, *The Global Times* or *Xinhua*, pinpointed that suspicions “represented the widespread hostility that Westerners feel toward a rising China” and that they “revealed Western envy at the nation’s growing economic might”. Similarly, *The Washington Post* mentioned that many Chinese (further incited by the words of the aforementioned media and others such as *Guangming Daily*) believed that there was a bias against China.

We should bear in mind that “the content of print news and television producers in China is inevitably influenced by the Communist Party of China” (Bie and Billings, 2013: 5). At present, China ranks 175th among 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index, according to Reporters Without Borders (2014). Moreover, we should consider that the “Chinese coverage exhibited a strong desire to protect its national image and national identity through defending its athlete” (Bie and Billings, 2013: 15). Nevertheless, leaving those factors aside, by such reactions it can be seen that Leonard’s comments helped to generate tension between China and the Western countries, especially the United States, reinforcing the archetypical stereotype of “us versus them” (Billings *et al.*, 2011).

## Conclusions

Taking all the coverage as a whole, the sampled quality newspapers considered Ye Shiwen’s story as salient information (Kioussis, 2004) to be transmitted. However, as has been demonstrated, *The Guardian* started a case of rumours by giving excessive weight to Leonard’s words. A closer analysis reveals that the subsequent days allowed the newspaper to balance her portrayal by providing a wider range of balanced sources and a more comprehensive explanation of the relevant contexts to understand the reasons for her success. Despite this, the situation had already generated consequences from the perspective of the deontological principles of truth, justice and responsibility.

With this case in mind, it would be worthwhile to continue monitoring the presence of rumours and speculations in the coverage of forthcoming Olympic events (Rio 2016, Pyeongchang 2018 and Tokyo 2020). The range of quality newspapers considered could be expanded to other media outlets from different journalistic cultures in Europe and beyond. Secondly, the triangulation of the qualitative content analysis with more interviews with sports journalists, scholars and citizens would be very rewarding. It would allow the examination of the ethical values of professionals and of the institutional framework in which they work, and to discern the ethical expectations of the readership regarding the coverage of the Olympics and other sports mega-events. All the aforementioned knowledge would contribute to a better understanding of sports journalism from the standpoints of ethics and of quality of information.

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