

“Football killed him and football didn't want to know”: A corpus-assisted examination of UK newspapers’ reporting on association football-related traumatic brain injury and dementia.

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Abstract

Sport-related traumatic brain injury (TBI) is increasingly recognised as a risk factor for dementia. This chapter is specifically interested in the UK print media's coverage of TBI and dementia risk in the context of football (i.e., soccer). It presents a corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis of how UK national newspapers report on football and dementia across a decade (2013-2022, inclusive). The chapter’s approach combines quantitative data sampling strategies with qualitative analysis, focusing first on how the link between football and dementia risk from TBI is reported over time, and then on how some of the key stakeholders are positioned in relation to this link, focusing on newspapers, football authorities, footballers and footballers’ families. Findings indicate that the newspapers tended to align themselves with footballers and family members campaigning for better understandings of, and support for footballers experiencing, TBI and dementia. Indeed, there are multiple examples of newspaper-led campaigns, which often draw attention to the inadequacies of football organisations. While seemingly supporting footballers and their families, evidence points to how the newspapers also risk contributing to the stigmatisation of dementia. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the study’s limitations and recommending future research directions.

Introduction

The news can be regarded as ‘a window on the world’ (Tuchman, 1978, p. 1), as its focus and framing can greatly influence how social phenomena are understood and experienced. It is thus notable that both dementia and association football (also known as soccer; hereafter football) are consistently newsworthy topics in the UK. In recent decades, reporting has grown around risk factors for dementia and potential protective measures that can be taken, including engaging in physical activity. Media reports have been shown to simplify dementia research by implying cause-and-effect relationships and focusing too intently on individual prevention, which can be misleading or controversial (Peel, 2014; Peterson & Schickltanz, 2021). Interest has simultaneously grown in the media regarding the potential link between traumatic brain injury (TBI) in football (from headers, collisions and falls etc.) and dementia, as seen in the rise of documentaries and newspaper coverage (e.g., Malcolm, 2021; White et al., 2022). Of particular interest to this chapter is that some UK newspapers do not just report on, but also *campaign* about, a link between TBI in football and subsequent dementia diagnoses.

In 2020, TBI was added to the *Lancet* Commissions’ risk factor list for dementia, expanding upon their earlier list from 2017 (Livingston et al., 2017, 2020), which reflects the relatively recent broad acceptance of a link between the two. At present, TBI is one of fourteen potentially modifiable risk factors for dementia recognised by the 2024 *Lancet* Commission, accounting for approximately three percent of dementia diagnoses. Within a discussion of potential causes, the authors write of an ‘increasing concern that professional and amateur soccer and rugby players live with and die more from neurodegenerative illnesses than do the general population, which might be related to occasional severe TBI or frequent mTBI [mild TBI] from physical contact with others or heading a football’ (Livingston et al., 2024, p.12).

With growing scientific evidence and public concern regarding the risks of TBI in sports in relation to neurodegenerative conditions such as dementia, some sporting authorities have introduced regulations aimed at protecting players. In a UK football context, in November 2020, the Professional Footballers’ Association (PFA: the union for professional footballers) called for heading in training to be reduced and monitored (PFA, 2020). In 2020 and 2021, the Football Associations (FA) introduced heading guidance for youth, amateur adults and professionals, which ranged from banning heading for children under eleven in training and discouraging it in matches, to limiting heading in training for professional adult players and recommending heading recovery time (e.g., FA England, 2021). There is debate in the scientific, sporting and

public sphere about the appropriate mitigative action, with, for instance, some players and coaches arguing that heading is an important aspect of the game and a smaller cause of concussion than head-to-body contact (Parsanejad et al., 2023).

Existing research on media representations of football and TBI (and in some cases, dementia) have largely focused on coverage surrounding particular moments (namely, a documentary and a specific concussion case; see Malcolm, 2021; White et al., 2022). Complementing such studies, we consider how this link is reported on over a ten-year period. Of particular interest is Malcolm's (2021) study, which observed a tendency for newspapers to use lived experience to fuel what Peel (2014) refers to as a 'panic-blame' narrative regarding dementia risk. This included blaming footballing organisations for failing to recognise the issue and positioning brain injuries as 'beyond the boundaries of *accepted* and *expected* health conditions within soccer's risk culture' (Malcolm, 2021, p.30). Simultaneously, especially in the documentary *Dementia, Football and Me*, presented by former professional footballer, Alan Shearer, risk was individualised, often emphasising personal choice over structural solutions. Overall, Malcolm (2021) found that the documentary and its media coverage reinforced dementia tropes, while also challenging the notion that sport is simply part of a healthy lifestyle by linking it to increased risk of dementia through TBI.

Considering the media's role in shaping public understandings of health and risk, this chapter explores how UK newspapers report on football, TBI and dementia across a decade in which concern about this topic grew substantially (01.01.2013-31.12.2022). Specifically, we consider the following questions:

- (1) How is the link between football and dementia risk from TBI represented across the corpus?
- (2) How are different stakeholders (such as footballers and football organisations) positioned in relation to this issue?

Methodology

In this chapter, we take a corpus-assisted approach to Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), which we outline below. Beginning with the concept of 'discourse' in CDS, we understand this in the social constructionist sense as a 'set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events'

(Burr, 2015, p.32). From this view, discourses are both *influenced by* and help to *shape* society, as they can be ‘used to represent, evaluate, argue for and against, and ultimately to legitimate or delegitimize social actions’ (Cap, 2023). Our approach to discourse is *critical* in the sense of being problem-oriented, as we are concerned with instances of both ‘problematic’ and ‘productive use of power’ (Luke, 2002, p.98), for example, regarding newspapers’ use of coverage and campaigns to advocate for social change (e.g., greater player support).

CDS typically involves closely analysing texts in terms of their linguistic features (word choices, grammatical choices, etc.), alongside their social contexts, to interpret such linguistic choices in relation to wider discourses (Cap, 2023). Taking a *corpus-assisted* approach to CDS (see Baker, 2023) can aid analysts to more systematically select their datasets by using large bodies of text (i.e., *corpora*, singular: *corpus*) that have been designed with the aim of representing a particular communicative context: here, our corpus represents UK news coverage of dementia, within which we can specifically search for dementia-related articles that discuss football (for a detailed discussion of corpus linguistics, see McEnery & Wilson, 2001). Analysing corpora allows researchers to focus on larger-scale patterns and, in turn, to explore the incremental effects of discourses. We will outline the specifics of our approach further below, first describing how we used quantitative techniques, inductively, to identify recurrent linguistic patterns in the data (i.e., the ‘corpus-assisted’ aspect of our approach), which we then analyse more qualitatively (i.e., drawing on CDS) to interpret as constituting discourses around dementia and football.

Quantitative analysis: Identifying linguistic patterns

Our analysis is based on a purpose-built corpus representing UK newspaper reporting on dementia (see Brookes, 2023). This ‘Dementia News UK Corpus’ contains 11,372 articles across a decade (01.01.2013-31.12.2022), totalling 9,174,651 words. It contains eight national newspapers (*Express*, *Guardian*, *Independent*, *Mail*, *Mirror*, *Star*, *Telegraph*, *Times*), including their online, Sunday and ‘sister’ editions (e.g., the Scottish *Daily Record* and *Sunday Mail* is associated with the *Mirror*). Articles mention dementia at least once in their headline or at least three times in the body of the article. The corpus sits within the *CQPweb* tool at Lancaster University (Hardie, 2012). In this chapter, we examine frequent linguistic patterns around the word ‘football*’ (the * allows for alternative word endings such as ‘footballer’). Searching for ‘football*’ finds 10,852 mentions across 1,836 news articles (with a relative frequency of 1,182.824 occurrences per million words). This is notably higher than the American equivalent of ‘soccer*’ (102 uses across 70 texts) or other popular UK sports (‘rugby*’ is the second most

frequent, with 2,726 uses across 527 texts). Indeed, football occurs more frequently than the general term ‘sport’ (‘sport*’ occurs 4,059 times across 1,496 texts) in the Dementia News UK Corpus. Overall, this would suggest that football is particularly prominent when both dementia and sports are reported in the UK news.

Next, we examined which words had a statistically significant relationship with ‘football*’. This is referred to as *collocation*: the tendency for two or more words to co-occur together (making them ‘collocates’ of one another) and specifically, the extent to which this relationship of co-occurrence is statistically significant¹ (Baker, 2023). We calculated the top 40 collocates that occurred at least 100 times within five words to the left and/or right of the search term ‘football*’, shown in Table 1. For example, the words ‘dementia’ and ‘football*’ appeared near each other (collocated) 1,741 times.

Table 1. The top 40 collocates of ‘football*’, calculated using Dice coefficient.

Collocate (ranked 1-20)	Collocation frequency	Dice coefficient	Collocate (ranked 21-40)	Collocation frequency	Dice coefficient
<i>professional</i>	1,251	0.19110	<i>into</i>	351	0.03160
<i>former</i>	1,168	0.13320	<i>links</i>	180	0.03100
<i>Association</i>	940	0.13230	<i>Tackle</i>	183	0.03040
<i>heading</i>	1,020	0.13190	<i>played</i>	200	0.03040
<i>between</i>	567	0.06400	<i>more</i>	584	0.02980
<i>link</i>	383	0.05760	<i>in</i>	2,370	0.02920
<i>American</i>	278	0.04710	<i>'s</i>	1,388	0.02800
<i>'</i>	833	0.04660	<i>and</i>	3,047	0.02770
<i>Rugby</i>	374	0.04550	<i>its</i>	233	0.02680
<i>playing</i>	288	0.04400	<i>found</i>	290	0.02660
<i>players</i>	362	0.04220	<i>are</i>	767	0.02620
<i>dementia</i>	1,741	0.04010	<i>the</i>	5,110	0.02590
<i>Scottish</i>	238	0.03930	<i>of</i>	2,736	0.02520
<i>authorities</i>	230	0.03880	<i>among</i>	168	0.02460
<i>times</i>	308	0.03820	<i>study</i>	289	0.02460
<i>league</i>	267	0.03650	<i>who</i>	525	0.02440
<i>has</i>	796	0.03550	<i>that</i>	1,244	0.02440
<i>Football</i>	306	0.03470	<i>campaign</i>	163	0.02430
<i>likely</i>	269	0.03240	<i>disease</i>	348	0.02400
<i>English</i>	185	0.03220	<i>research</i>	330	0.02390

¹ We use Dice coefficient as our statistical measure of collocation. Dice coefficient represents a compromise between measures of significance and effect size; it tends to favour collocates that occur exclusively in each other’s company, but which do not have to be rare (meaning that it can be useful for discourse-based studies focussed on the identification of recurrent patterns).

Qualitative analysis: Interpreting discourses

Simply knowing that words collocate is not sufficient to provide the context needed to understand the discursive representation of football in dementia-related news articles. To do this, the first author (Emma) read text extracts where the words co-occurred together. She accessed these text extracts using a *concordance*: a list of each occurrence of a word in a corpus together with the text it occurs with, demonstrating a word's collocations and other language patterns (see Figure 1 below for an example). Our concordances showed every instance of the searched for word (i.e., football*) and its collocates (e.g., 'dementia') occurring in the corpus' texts. The amount of visible text for each concordance line could also be expanded to read more of the article, alongside information such as newspaper publication, headline and date.

Figure 1. A screengrab showing how concordance lines appear in CQPweb (here, of 'football*' occurring alongside its collocate 'dementia'). This shows 25 randomised cases of the overall 1,741 co-occurrences.

Your query "football*" returned 10,852 matches in 1,836 different texts (in 9,174,651 words [11,372 texts]; frequency: 1,182.824 instances per million words), collocating with dementia (1,741 hits), ordered randomly [0.023 seconds]			
< << >> >		Show Page: 1	Line view
		Show in corpus order	Choose action...
No	Text	Solution 1 to 50 Page 1 / 35	
1	dmta009843	had sent in his 13 years leading the managers' union .	FOOTBALL MANAGERS LOST TO DEMENTIA JACK CHARLTON (1935-2020) World Cup-winning hero
2	dmta003773	level and amount of physical and cognitive activities .	DEMENTIA STRIKES GERMAN FOOTBALL GREAT GERD MULLER GERMAN football legend Gerd Muller can no longer recognise
3	dmta004204	calls for more detailed studies and investigations into potential links between playing	football and dementia . A number of questions are obvious . What is
4	dmta012284	In the meantime , Sportsmail launched our seven-point campaign calling on	football to tackle its dementia crisis and which , on day one ,
5	dmta007646	" Steve Bruce has spoken of his growing concern about dementia in	football after it was revealed the former Newcastle United manager Joe Kinnear is
6	dmta008397	at the age of 59 , last night called for dementia in	football to be formally recognised as an industrial disease . In urging governing
7	dmta011712	condition was linked to years of heading the football A former international	footballer who died with dementia may have developed the condition through heading the
8	dmta004503	Sutton says that he first became aware of the potential link between	football and dementia when he heard about the plight of Duncan Forbes ,
9	dmta008418	Society believes that more research is needed to explore a link between	football and dementia . From our perspective further , in-depth research is needed
10	dmta012737	come . " Stewart admits that the findings of his report into	football and dementia painted a damning picture , with repeated heading of the
11	dmta010492	father 's death can be a 'catalyst' in the fight to end	football 's dementia scandal . John Stiles ' World Cup-winning dad passed away
12	dmta012496	hero husband , Sir Bobby , had dementia - news which shook	football and followed the death of Nobby Stiles . Penny wants any other
13	dmta008337	welcome the news that the PFA is ready to regard dementia in	football as an industrial disease . That is if your organisation means it
14	dmta003520	around 390g while modern-day versions were 430g . 'Alan Shearer : Dementia	Football & Me' is broadcast on Sunday at 10.30pm on BBC One .
15	dmta010770	well as further research into the actual causes of dementia in former	footballers . A task force will be convened to do that . However
16	dmta007997	any effort to help make our communities safer . Sportsmail called on	football to finally tackle its dementia crisis one year ago Significant progress has
17	dmta009785	behalf of campaigners Judith Gates and Dawn Astle , for dementia in	football to be recognised as an industrial disease . The group of former
18	dmta010136	key aspect of her tireless campaign . A submission for dementia in	football to be classified as an industrial disease would , if successful ,
19	dmta010263	Astle , is calling for an urgent public inquiry into dementia in	football . Former England international Lopez Astle died aged 59 in 2002 ,
20	dmta011720	Even more fortunately he has spent 12 years researching dementia in	football . Walker wants it classified as an industrial injury and he wants
21	dmta008324	fund and support more studies into this most callous of diseases .	Football and dementia Sir Bobby Charlton is the fifth England player from the
22	dmta011422	back of Scots research which showed the risk of dementia among pro	footballers was three-and-a-half times greater than expected . Professor Willie Stewart is a
23	dmta007616	this newspaper launched a campaign , saying enough is enough' and that	football 's dementia scandal must be tackled . One of our demands was
24	dmta010168	his complete and utter failure to act with regard to dementia in	football . This is a union for professional players , past and present
25	dmta003726	and conclusive way of establishing - or discounting - a link between	football and dementia . But The Independent understands that a Football Association-commissioned research

When considering change over time, we viewed? all concordance lines in chronological order (below, we discuss this in relation to the collocate 'link'). Beyond this chronological focus, to make manual analysis more manageable, 100 examples were randomly sampled for each of the top 40 collocates occurring alongside 'football*' (4,000 concordance lines in total). From

reading these, Emma identified broad topics according to the primary contexts in which collocates were used (see Table 2).

Table 2. The top 40 collocates of ‘football*’, calculated using Dice coefficient.

Primary context of use	Collocates
Risk and research	<i>Heading, between, link, playing, times, dementia, likely, into, links, more, in, and, found, among, study, disease, research.</i>
Stakeholders and their perspectives/actions	<i>Professional, former, Association, ', players, Scottish, authorities, league, Football, English, Tackle, 's, who, campaign.</i>
Other sports	<i>American, rugby.</i>
Other	<i>has, are, the, of, that.</i>

Our chapter focuses on discussions of risk, research and stakeholders. We focus our analysis on frequently occurring linguistic patterns, although we also consider data that is instead noteworthy for its rarity and/or for representing significant counter-discourses to the trends otherwise reported. For transparency and clarity, the top 40 collocates shown in Table 1 are italicised in the examples below when they appear within five words to the left or right of the search term 'football*' (shown in bold), which reflects the distance threshold used to identify collocates. Where needed, we underline words to signal our own added emphasis.

Figure 2. The typographical conventions used when presenting data in this chapter.

Bold word	Bold is used for the search term (here, ‘ football* ’).
<i>Italicised word</i>	The top 40 collocates (Table 1) are italicised when they appear within five words to the left or right of the search term 'football*'. <i>Heading, between, link, playing, times, dementia, likely, into, links, more, in, and, found, among, study, disease, research.</i>
<u>Underlined word</u>	We underline words to signal our own added emphasis.

During this qualitative analysis stage, we focused on how the articles represented the risk of TBI and dementia, alongside the viewpoints of different stakeholders (footballers, football authorities, etc.). Emma provided the initial interpretations, which were then discussed with the co-authors and adapted accordingly, with further changes made following editor feedback. Our research backgrounds are in dementia discourses rather than sport or TBI (except for Hannah whose expertise lie in gender and sport research), and this perspective is reflected in both our focus and analyses. Our analysis focuses on UK newspapers’ discursive construction of the

link between football, TBI and dementia, and representations of key stakeholders, notably, football organisations (the FA and PFA), footballers' families, newspapers and footballers.

The link between football, TBI and dementia

As Table 3 shows, across the decade, there is a general increase in newspapers discussing a 'link' (or 'links') in relation to 'football*'. Our qualitative analysis found that this link is primarily discussed in terms of either researching or recognising the risk of developing dementia from playing professional football, especially due to heading the ball.

Table 3. The number of times that 'link' and 'links' collocates with 'football*' in each year (total co-occurrences: 383 times and 180 times respectively).

Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Freq. of 'link' as collocate of 'football*'	0	3	0	8	91	13	51	108	89	20
Freq. of 'links' as collocate of 'football*'	0	0	2	3	34	10	8	79	40	4
Total per year	0	3	2	11	125	23	59	187	129	24

Over time, the reporting shifts in its focus. Across the first four years, a 'link' (or 'links') is mentioned only 16 times, and it is frequently mitigated due to a need for further research. For instance, journalists discuss a 'possible link' (Peters, *Mail on Sunday*, 16.03.2014; Manger, *Mirror*, 10.04.2016) and ask 'is there a link between football and Alzheimer's disease?' (Curtis, *Mirror*, 16.11.2016). In 2016, Ziegler reports for the *Times* (11.04.2016) that 'without the necessary research it is impossible to conclude any link between heavy footballs and an increased risk of dementia'.

From 2017 onwards, a link is reported far more frequently, with clear peaks in 2017, 2020 and 2021 (see Table 3). Such peaks are likely related to multiple newsworthy events occurring in

these years, such as media reporting of various research studies' findings on a possible link, alongside Alan Shearer's *Dementia, football and Me* documentary in 2017, multiple prominent England team members from the 1966 World Cup squad dying in 2020, FA guidelines on heading restrictions being announced in 2020 and a partnership between Alzheimer's Society and the FA emerging in 2021. As the years continue, there are more references to research findings and higher markers of certainty, as illustrated below:

A scientist studying **football's links** to *dementia* says Billy McNeill's illness will open up the debate about the disease. Glasgow University neuropathologist Dr Willie Stewart and experts from the University of Stirling found that heading even modern-day balls can cause a loss of brain function. [...] Another study at University College London looked at deceased former players' brains and found the sport is as damaging as boxing.

(Stewart, *Daily Record and Sunday Mail*, 26.02. 2017)

And now they finally have evidence. There is a casual [sic; causal] *link between professional football and dementia*. It's an undeniable fact for a game that has been too happy to stay in denial.

(Waddell, *Daily Record and Sunday Mail*, 27.10. 2019)

Other reports include phrases such as 'conclusive' link/evidence (4 instances), 'confirmed [the link]' (9 instances), 'direct link' (6 instances), 'causal link' (3 instances) and proved 'beyond [reasonable] doubt' (2 instances).

Accompanying the increasing reporting about a link between football and dementia is a focus on heading. Overall, we found 1,020 instances of 'heading' co-occurring with 'football*' and randomly sampled 100 cases for qualitative analysis. Sixty-five of these 100 cases cover the link between heading and TBI and/or dementia, with the certainty of such a link varying from potential to definitive. Meanwhile, 33/100 cases discuss changes (both potential and actual) surrounding football regulations in response to such a link, particularly focusing on heading. For instance, Bagot in the *Mirror* (02.08.2021) asks: 'is heading absolutely necessary for football to continue? Is exposure to dementia risk absolutely required with the game?' A more detailed analysis of specific regulatory changes and the debates surrounding these is beyond the scope of this chapter and could be pursued in future research.

The stakeholder struggle: Stop “sweeping it under the carpet”

As the below example illustrates, in the years before the newspapers cite emerging research studies as evidence of a link, they can instead present the families of former players as offering ‘compelling’ anecdotal evidence for a link between (professional) football and dementia.

*The link to **football** appears even more compelling when you ask the family about other former players. "There are many suffering from brain conditions," says Jenny. "The Jeff Astle Foundation has been inundated. I can think of five friends of ours who have died in the last two years." The strong suspicion - which is shared by the Astle and Kopel families - is *that football* is "sweeping it under the carpet" out of fear for what they might find. "We feel disgusted," says Sarah. The families simply want the truth and for some *of football's* vast riches to help fund the Astle campaign for care facilities that are appropriate for relatively young former sportsmen.*

(Wilson, *Telegraph*, 29.12.2016)

The article accuses football organisations of failing to sufficiently research the long term impacts of TBI in football or support affected players: they are “sweeping it under the carpet” out of fear for what they might find’. Here and throughout many examples, synecdoche is used whereby the all-encompassing term ‘football’ (which can refer to the game, institutions etc.) is used to refer specifically to football organisations and the people who run them. When reified in this way, ‘football’ can thus be morally evaluated in the above example as being motivated by fear, disgust-inducing, impeding families’ search for ‘the truth’ and as hoarding their ‘vast riches’ rather than taking responsibility for player wellbeing. A conflict is thus established, here between footballers/their families and ‘football’.

Within this combative discourse, a conflict metaphor can be identified through word choices such as ‘battle’ (141 instances across the results for ‘football*’), ‘battling’ (58 instances), ‘fight*’ (141 instances), ‘combat’ (19 instances), ‘kill*’ (111 instances), ‘victim[s]’ (42 instances) and ‘victory’ (34 instances). The below examples show some of the ways in which such language is popularly used in the sample concordance lines examined for the top 40 collocates:

SIR ALEX FERGUSON and Sir Kenny Dalglish have joined forces to support **football's** *fight* against *dementia*.

The duo will join England manager Gareth Southgate in a one-off event to raise funds for *research into the link between **football** and the disease* - in conjunction with Sportsmail's campaign - and support those suffering from dementia and their families.

(Keegan, *MailOnline*, 04.01.2020)

A study into the link between **football** and dementia has finally been commissioned following an 18-month Daily Telegraph campaign exposing what has been branded sport's "silent scandal". [...] Confirmation of the study was a victory for The Telegraph and the victims of the killer illness - including several members of England's 1966 World Cup-winning team - as well as the families who had campaigned for many years for the game to properly investigate any connection and were furious at its failure to do so.

Chief among them was Dawn Astle, the daughter of West Bromwich Albion legend and former England striker Jeff, who a coroner ruled in 2002 had been killed by repeatedly *heading* a **football**.

Admitting she had been "quite teary" following Thursday's announcement, she thanked the media for its support in her fight, adding: "It's been very lonely a lot of the time and it's pure frustration at times when you know - because it said on my dad 's death certificate - *that football killed him and **football*** just didn't want to know.

(Rumsby, *Daily Telegraph*, 23.11. 2017)

Conflict metaphors are widely used in media portrayals of both football (Broccias & Canepa, 2005; Deluliis, 2011) and dementia (Brookes 2023; Putland & Brookes, 2024). Dementia has frequently been positioned as a 'killer illness', with many 'victims', and so it is often rendered an enemy that society must 'fight' (Putland & Brookes, 2024). In this context, while dementia can be positioned as the enemy (e.g., '**football**'s fight against *dementia*'), the opponent in this conflict is also oftentimes the game of football and the organisations that determine its regulations and activities, exemplified by Dawn Astle's above claim that '**football** killed him and **football** just didn't want to know'. Here, the institution of football is reified as the killer and also as refusing to acknowledge the situation. Notably, 'football' may refer to both the role of the sport in Jeff Astle's death (specifically, the action of 'repeatedly heading a football') and to the

institution of football (those involved at an organisational level) who are construed as having abandoned Astle, and others in similar situations.

In this conflict, clear sides are established. As the examples demonstrate, UK newspapers explicitly align themselves with a coalition of stakeholders — including researchers, charities, the media, footballers and their families — that strive to firstly prove the link between football, TBI and dementia, and secondly, to improve the support provided for all footballers. Indeed, above, one family campaigner is reported to have ‘thanked the media for its support’. In this chapter, we focus in particular on newspapers, families and footballers.

Reflecting the newspapers’ campaigning positioning, the collocates ‘tackle’ and ‘campaign’ can be primarily attributed to the references that newspapers make to their own campaigns — namely, the *Telegraph Sport*’s 2016 ‘Tackle **Football**’s Dementia Scandal’, the *Sunday Mail*’s 2017 ‘**Football**’s Timebomb’ and *Sportsmail*’s 2020 ‘Enough is ENOUGH’ campaigns. For example, above, one article foregrounds ‘The Daily Telegraph exposing what has been branded sport’s “silent scandal”’ while another links Sportsmail’s campaign to fundraising efforts to support research into a link. Even before campaigns are launched, newspapers are positioned as taking on an investigative role to critique football authorities, including in 2014 when Peters reports that:

At the time, the FA promised a 10-year joint *study* with *the Professional Footballers’ Association* to investigate any possible link between heading footballs and an increased prevalence of neuro-degenerative illnesses among ex-professional players. To date, not a single piece of FA research has been published, and The Mail on Sunday can find no evidence of the study ever being made.

(Peters, *Mail on Sunday*, 16.03.2014)

The opponents to newspapers’ campaigns, in most cases, are football authorities. Alongside being generalised as ‘football’ (e.g., ‘**football** didn’t want to know’) and ‘football authorities’ (e.g., when discussing ‘the shameful inaction of the **footballing** authorities’; Manger, *Daily Mirror*, 19.01.2022) two specific organisations are often mentioned: the FA and the PFA. As exemplified both above and below, newspapers foreground criticisms of these football organisations’ (in)action and attribute responsibility to these authorities to do their ‘duty’ to ‘protect players’ and ‘help’ everyone affected:

Sutton's *professional* **footballer** father, Mike, died on Boxing Day following a 10-year battle with dementia. And the player-turned-pundit has spearheaded Sportsmail's campaign for research funding, temporary concussion substitutes and limited heading in training to protect players. 'The fact is the FA and PFA (*Professional Footballers' Association*) have not done anywhere near enough,' Sutton said. 'They have ignored, shunned, turned their backs on a massive issue. Hundreds of players have died. My father among them. And we do not even know what has happened in the amateur game.'

(Carr, Elson & Robinson, *MailOnline*, 23.03.2021)

All of **football** has a duty to get this right, to protect players, to help the families enduring the cruel sight of their loved ones being dragged away from them by dementia.

(Winter, *The Times*, 21.10.2019)

The examples discussed so far primarily contain either the words of the journalist or direct quotes of family members who are campaigning (or who are, in the case of Chris Sutton, both journalists and family campaigners)². In comparison, the below example is notable for also reporting on the claims of **both** family campaigners and a football organisation, the PFA:

The Professional Footballers' Association has been calling for an industry-wide care fund since 2019 but has so far failed to reach agreement with football's other stakeholders. The PFA Charity has said that it cannot afford residential or nursing home fees but can offer adhoc support for respite care or property adjustments.

Dawn Astle and Chris Sutton, whose fathers both died of dementia following careers as professional players, have consistently called for an industry-wide care fund and pointed to the PFA Charity 's net assets which, as of the most recent accounts, stand at £58.9 million.

(Wilson, *Daily Telegraph*, 02.02.2022)

This example demonstrates that even if the claims of football organisations (the PFA) are reported, either directly or indirectly, the organisations' claims (being unable to afford a more

² A notable exception is the earlier example discussing Dr Willie Stewart his research team (Stewart, 2017).

comprehensive care fund) may be followed by counter claims (family members foregrounding the PFA Charity's wealth of £58.9 million). Notably, the contradictory representations of the PFA (as having insufficient funds vs having sufficient wealth to provide a care fund) are explored but are arguably structured in a way that scrutinises and undermines the PFA's response, reinforcing campaigners' agendas.

News campaigns: Placing footballers in the story

As the previous examples illustrate, personal stories and emotive language are two frequently used rhetorical strategies within the media's campaigning to address the link between football, TBI and dementia. The below example demonstrates how, as research into this link increases, newspapers might also combine personal stories and emotive language with statistics from research studies to further support their campaigns:

Sportsmail has started a *campaign* to finally *tackle* **football's dementia** scandal [...] In conjunction with Alzheimer's Society's Sport United Against Dementia, we are calling for meaningful action to battle the disease. Sportsmail are announcing a seven-point charter for *the **Football Association, Professional Footballers' Association*** and the game's governing bodies to address immediately. [...] Studies have found that those who played the game professionally are 3.5 times more likely to die from neurodegenerative disease than the general population. It is a shocking statistic that needs to be addressed urgently. Sportsmail columnist Chris Sutton is at the forefront of our campaign, having courageously spoken about how his father Mike, also a *former **footballer***, is dying *of dementia*. 'It wipes you out as a person and leaves a blank page,' Sutton says. [...] My dad and countless others have been let down. [...]

(Keegan, *Daily Mail*, 16.11.2020)

As previously mentioned, newspapers regularly report the perspective of the family members of former professional footballers with dementia. In comparison, the footballers themselves who have been diagnosed with dementia are often passivised and victimised. This might be in relation to the sport — these athletes have been 'let down' and are indeed quite passive victims of the exploitation of athletic labour, with a lack of regulation or support to protect players. Simultaneously, in previous examples we have discussed, footballers can be positioned by journalists as 'the victims of the killer illness' dementia, or as 'loved ones being dragged away from them [their family] by dementia'. Sometimes, the articles draw on the 'loss of self'

discourse associated with dementia, whereby the cognitive changes associated with the syndrome entail an 'unbecoming' of self and social death (Fontana & Smith, 1989). This is metaphorically envisioned in the most recent example as wiping 'a person' out until they become empty, 'a blank page'. While dementia can undeniably entail existential threats to a person's identity and relationships, and can bring great suffering, overly sensationalising the condition and suggesting that people diagnosed become devoid of what makes them a person (i.e., 'a blank page') risks delegitimizing people living with dementia as fellow persons with their own identities, in turn perpetuating existing fear and stigma surrounding the condition (Putland & Brookes, 2024).

It was highly unusual to see a footballer with dementia quoted in the concordance lines examined. For instance, of the 200 cases where 'played' collocates with 'football*', 39 take the perspective of family members discussing a loved one who played, 18 quote footballers without dementia and nine involve experts such as researchers. Three of the 200 instances quote former footballers diagnosed with dementia but two of those are family/friends' recollections of what they said in the past, while the other is Calderwood in the below example:

He sought no sympathy for his condition, merely the opportunity to raise awareness of its wider impact and encourage other sufferers to come forward. Asked if the competitor in him had made it difficult to speak out, Calderwood replied: "Yes, you try and hide it. But the message to others is not to be afraid to come forward and talk about it." [...] One of Scottish **football's** bubbliest characters, he remains philosophical about the disease. "Strangely, it hasn't been too bad," he said. "I've just got on with things."

(Forsyth, *The Times*, 17.08.2017)

This example is unusual for directly quoting a former footballer *after* his dementia diagnosis, attributing to Calderwood the agency to speak about his experiences and advocate for change. Notably, here, Calderwood presents life with dementia as not 'too bad', complicating the broader victim discourse and contrasting the usual emphasis on suffering.

Conclusion

Between 2013 and 2022, UK newspapers become increasingly certain in their reporting of a link between football and dementia risk from TBI. We found that the newspapers typically position

footballers, their families, researchers, other media outlets, and charities as allies united against two primary opponents: dementia itself and football authorities who are painted as inadequately addressing the issue. Conflict metaphors were often used to underline this, such as ‘fight’, ‘battling’ and ‘victory’, reflecting broader uses of this metaphor in both dementia and football coverage. Alongside reporting on the topic, newspaper-led campaigns explicitly aim to pressure football organisations to fund research, recognise a football-dementia link, implement changes to mitigate dementia risk and support people affected. Indeed, the public scrutiny encouraged by newspaper campaigns is a likely (although not sole) contributor to the changes implemented by football authorities, such as increased funding and heading regulations/guidance. Set against a norm of individualising dementia risk in newspaper coverage (e.g., Peel, 2014; Peterson & Schicktanz, 2021), such structurally oriented coverage and the explicit goal of achieving targeted social change through media coverage offers an important case study for what is arguably a ‘productive use of [newspaper] power’ (Luke, 2002, p.98). These and similar campaigns are recommended as a key area for future research.

However, while the newspaper campaigns and coverage in many ways promote greater awareness and support, at times the language used to support the cause risks presenting an overly fear-inducing and reductive view of dementia, alongside reducing people diagnosed to being devoid of self, or ‘blank’. While reflecting broader dementia discourses and a common rhetorical tactic of using fear-inducing language to highlight the importance of addressing dementia, this tragedy-oriented discourse has been frequently linked to dementia stigma, including discriminatory practices, for delegitimising and socially othering diagnosed individuals (e.g., Putland & Brookes, 2024).

This topic is of course far more complex than any one chapter can address. For instance, future work could more comprehensively explore how articles represent research findings and experts, alongside specific spokespeople/stakeholders. Examining how different responses to dementia risk in football are discursively constructed would be valuable, as would a more nuanced exploration of different newspapers’ coverage/campaigns and a focus on other potential themes, such as how gender is represented. Corpora such as ours are inevitably constrained in scope, and future research would benefit from considering the production context, audience reception and coverage in years outside of the decade covered here as well as how images and format contribute to meaning. Nonetheless, we hope that this chapter demonstrates the value of combining corpus methods with qualitative analysis when examining media discourses, here in relation to football, TBI and dementia risk.

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