Sports Journalism in the Eyes of New Media: How have Changes in Media Affected Sports Journalism?

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Abstract

Journalism has changed more in the past five years than it has in the previous 70 years.

Technological advancements are at the forefront of major change, as it is seemingly updating every year. This rapid change makes it difficult for both professionals and consumers to keep up but nonetheless maintaining pace is a must. The primary purpose of this research project was too deeply examine and analyze how recent developments in media has positively and, or negatively affected sports journalism. This study went beneath the surface of new media in how it pertains to sports journalism.
Introduction

Sports journalism is much more than the “toy box” or “sand box” of the newsroom. Similar to music, sports have great abilities of transcending cultures and societies. Sports are a global language that brings a stable and steady common ground. Sports are obviously how professionals in their respective sport, make their bread and butter, but that bread may be getting a bit molded for those that report on sports. To avoid this molding or survive through it, journalists must prepare themselves for the fresh, new brand of bread. That preparation may include many ever-changing things, but the most important thing is being willing and able to adapt to the changes.

New media is quite an interesting topic, but maybe even more interesting in the world of sports. The death of newspapers has been in the air for the last few years, as many print publications are now producing their content online. The death of sports journalism could be next if journalists continue to ignore the 800-pound elephant in the room, known as technological change. The recession is not the only major factor that is playing a role in new media, but technology and the recent rise of social networks are definitely rearranging and molding new direction for journalism. How sports are covered has changed over the course of time, and in researching, it was discovered that there is a potential market for success for tabloid journalism in sport. A growing popularity in investigative journalism was also realized, as well as a visible gap and conflict between local and national sport entities. Access is something that also causes for close attention. Journalists are no longer the only designated messengers and middle men and women of news, as bloggers and those that hold access have fully got involved with the delivery of news as well. Consequently this leaves the role of the sports journalist in question if not altogether alleviated. This timely topic is especially relevant and important for all
already involved with sport, and for those that wish to enter into the profession in the near future. This project examines the new direction of sports journalism and the diminished or perhaps enhanced role of the journalist.

**Literature Review**

*Local Media*

What are the issues with local media and national media? Many feel that national media outlets are driving lighter budgeted local media entities out of town, running for cover.

Brian Windhorst of the Cleveland based newspaper; The Plain Dealer offers “local sport reporters still have relevance, contrary to popular belief. We are still able to bring a certain credibility that national outlets just can’t. As a local reporter, I have the edge because I am in the community, which enables me to supply a first hand account on events. I am not someone just gathering information from aggregators or x and y sources, but instead I am supplying information as an eyewitness. The eyes and ears that was actually there will always take precedence over the eyes and ears that are reporting from the outside, looking in. That though, of course accompanies more pressure for local outlets to provide a more compelling, in depth story (B. Windhorst, personal communication, April 13, 2009).

It may very well be true that local outlets have the luxury of attaining inside information and getting it in the first person instead of through a liaison, but one area that local outlets are at a disadvantage is in financial resources. Your local newspaper or news network can’t compete financially with the ESPN’s, CBS Sports’ and FOX Sports’ of the world. According to espn.com, ESPN is the “Worlds leading multinational, multimedia sports company featuring a portfolio of over 50 multimedia sports assets. That is quite overwhelming, to even attempt to compete with but if that wasn’t enough, ESPN is tightening the choke on local outlets as they are going local
too. ESPN Chicago is a new subsidiary of ESPN but in local Chicago. Another problematic issue for local sports journalists is professional leagues and teams signing deals with national channels and networks to broadcast games. Consequently, this drives ratings from local networks, thus making a local broadcaster and reporter second fiddle and late. Viewers are watching sporting events on media giants, such as TNT, ESPN, and CBS, and the basic, local channels are being overlooked. In early 2009, television went digital and cable and satellite now monopolizes television. In the current NBA playoffs, TNT is averaging 8.36 million viewers; ESPN is averaging 4.43 million over the course of 17 games (mediaweek.com/content_disp). No games were shown on local television in the Cleveland Cavaliers vs. the Atlanta Hawks series. During these presentations, viewers are getting the voice of national commentators, while local reporters and commentators are close to nonexistent aside from the end of game analysis on local news and the next day wrap up in the local sport pages.

This obviously makes life tough for traditional local sports journalist. “Newspaper coverage after an event is seen as particularly valuable because of journalists’ expertise and because of the time lapse, the depth of analysis and considered opinion they can offer. The ability to cover post match incidents is also valued. “What’s gone on once they go down the tunnel- the rollicking they got from the manager, almost like a gossip column,” one fan said. “You know the headlines, but it’s a habit to compare your own opinion with what you saw and the analysis is more considered, they’ve got more breathing space to add something extra (Guardian, 2003a).

How Coverage Has Changed

Everything is going digital and many journalists as well as their outlets have failed to maintain pace with the frequent changes in media. The way athletes are covered has changed in
recent years passed. As journalism is becoming more and more specialized and niche driven, sports journalism has witnessed the rise of investigative reporting. Programs like E: 60, Outside The Lines, and The Sports Reporters are a few examples of how journalism is changing gears. Sportswriter, Robert Weintraub suggests, “Much news oriented sports coverage is often seen as not opinionated enough. Everything is framed as an argument. Sport journalists are insiders in the proverbial know, whatever bloated shape it takes. Accordingly, they dispense with incredible vigor their judgments against, among other things, the personal character of players and coaches and the business decisions of team franchises” (Rowe, 2008).

People want more than scores and highlights and this places a visible burden on sport journalists to meet the demand for more. Viewers want inside analysis, as curiosity and the thirst for personal invasion seems to be strong. Athletes used to be the most privacy protected celebrity figures but those days are coming to an end. “There absolutely is a market for sport drama” (T. Hodson, personal communication. May, 11, 2009). Hodson believes that there is a market for tabloid media in sports and his assumption may not be so farfetched. Now days Enews, Perez Hilton and Entertainment Tonight are not the only ones spilling the beans on celebrity personals but many sport networks and departments are also reporting on athlete’s personal lives. People now are interested about Tom Brady’s super model wife, people want to know the updates on Michael Vick’s legal woes and people have an interest in knowing that Alex Rodriguez had a late night cup of coffee with Madonna.

Sports are more scandal driven then ever before, In Michael Rowe’s 2008’s “How Sports writing Lost Its Game” article he does an exceptional job in capturing the big issues. Rowe writes “it’s not so much that the under nuanced steroids saga ought to be disregarded, it’s simply the case that doping acts as gravity, well sucking in the attention of fans and sportswriters alike.
It’s easy to get your pique up over such scandals and refuse to understand the motivations compelling pharmaceutical enhancement at the cost of giving in to the 24/7 news cycle and prioritizing scandal over more sophisticated reporting.”

It is convincingly true that scandal and controversy sales papers and it appears not to be any different in sport. Jerome Tillman is a graduating senior and the former Ohio University Men’s Basketball starting power forward. He shared his dislike for dirt in sports, “It doesn’t belong in the game, but you can’t get made at reporters for telling it like it is. If it wasn’t any drama or mess to report then we wouldn’t be having this conversation” (J. Tillman, personal communication, May 2, 2009).

Drama lies behind many sport figures and leagues and we are in present days where journalists are unveiling the once untouched curtain. When NCAA coaches violate recruiting rules, no secret is kept to the media, as the story is broken to the public. When professional athletes are injecting themselves with illegal substances it shows up in sport publications headlines. Readers and viewers are now informed of the business side of sport, as it has been realized recently there is an enjoyable market there as well.

**Access Issues**

Access is the keys to the vehicle of every journalist. A great journalist must be able to network, communicate, and make relationships beneficial to their work. Sport journalists often find themselves in a tight bond between the public and the network that writes their checks. They also walk a noticeably thin line between professional relationships and personal relationships with the people they cover. What do you do when the person that you are doing a story on is the person that dictates your access? A journalist’s access can quickly be forever cut if a line is crossed, a false sentence is printed, a trust bond is broken, or for even less trivial things than
those. Athletes can easily offer the famous line of baseball’s Hall of Fame player, Rod Carew, “I’m sorry but I don’t talk to the press” (SportsCenter, 1980). A journalist has no story without any access. This is true for all journalist but maybe even more so for sport journalists. Those covering in the world of politics always have different doors to open for information, because political figures hold a certain obligation to communicate with the media.

Owners, advertisers, athletes and leagues owning access have gotten especially problematic for sports journalists in recent years. Sports need journalists but journalists are always reminded that they are the ones that must cooperate if they want to keep their jobs because they are the disposable ones.

“The reporter’s objectivity is what gives the sport promoter’s event credibility” (Koppett, 1982, p. 66). This points out the necessity for journalists in the sporting industry and the obvious need for journalistic attention. The recent lack of freedom that journalists are able to exercise is also a major change that has occurred in the last few years. We are in an age where leagues (NBATV) and teams (New York Yankees, New Jersey Nets) own their own networks. Subsequently this gives leagues better leverage and control over content because they are in a position to manipulate and influence. This puts journalists yet in another bind. What is a journalist to do when he or she receives a major tip about a story but that story can be damaging to the organization that he or she works for? Should the journalist hold true to his/her responsibility as being a “watch dog” and reporting news or should they sacrifice not informing the public, for the sake of maintaining employment under that network. Journalists have been influenced negatively in this instance. The profession and those employed within it have been coerced into cooperating, thus pointing to the end of journalists being unbiased because of a biased agenda setting.
“So the media, as certifiers of authenticity and eager watchdogs of competitive integrity, perform a service the promoter could not buy at any price. To do that and to retain their ability to criticize, ferret out facts and make general nuisances of themselves. By the same token, excessive praise and friendliness showed by a promoter to his media compromises the impression of objectivity. Nevertheless, neither side enjoys the consequences of feeling opposed, to the other and friction is the rule” (Koppett, 1981, p. 67).

Objectivity is in question heavily in today’s sport coverage. During a time where economics are scarce, credibility and objectivity appears to be on the bottom of the priority list as media outlets are in battle for their livelihoods. Newspapers are holding on for dear breath and as a result compliance with advertisers is met whether or not it is what the networks wish to do. Today advertisers are controlling content more because they retain high power, with big money.

*Blogs*

Blogs play and intricate role not only in sports journalism but also in the world. According to Universal McCann 184 million people worldwide have started a blog and the Bivings Group reports that 95% of the top 100 newspapers carry reporter blogs. Blogs are personal diaries that can be published for anyone to access. Blogging, which is the acting of writing in a blog, is easy and anyone with an opinion can do it. No education, no degree, no journalistic experience is needed at all. “Blogs have reshaped the web, impacted journalism and enabled millions of people to have a voice and connect with others” (Blogger.com/tour.start.g).

“Shaken up journalism” is an understatement, as blogs has placed journalism in frenzy if not a panic. Blogspot.com was formed in 1999 but blogging lagged and didn’t take off drastically until 2003. Other blog sites has followed suit and has developed online, but there still remains one burning question. Are bloggers journalists? E.W Scripps School of Journalism
Director, Tom Hodson believes that bloggers aren’t journalists but journalists can be bloggers.

“All a blog is an opinion. I have an opinion and their opinion is no more than mine.” (T. Hodson, personal communication May 11, 2009) The criticism on blogging is that it is highly opinionated and lightly factual. Also bloggers are not held to the same regard as journalists and the accountability is not the same. Sure, bloggers have a code of ethics, as can be seen on cyberjournalist.net but if violated penalties are not as harsh as they are for violations made by journalists. Journalists must be careful not to sacrifice credibility or ethics but bloggers can be a little more relaxed.

Journalists certainly carry a larger burden of accountability and the pressure of getting it right. Journalists may have an advantage though because of their entitlement to prized access. Bloggers may however be closing in on that advantage as cbs.com reported in August 2008 that bloggers had a high demand for press passes and access. Bloggers seem to be breathing down the neck of journalists with a burning, hot and uncomfortable breath. Unfortunately that breath doesn’t seem to be getting any cooler or going away. Not just regular people with opinions are blogging, but athletes are as well. This is a “nightmare,” as Ohio University’s Men’s Baseball Team play-by-play host Russ Eisenstein explains it. “Blogging may not be completely diminishing the role of journalists but it is definitely forcing journalists to be more proactive and reactive, as the level of competition is growing (R. Eisenstein, personal communication, May 7, 2009).

Competition is definitely high, as journalists are seeing stories being broken athletes and teams themselves through team blogs or player blogs. Trades, firings, disputes and other issues are being announced via personal or team blogs and this ultimately hurts journalists from doing their job.
Social Networks

Sam Cooke sang that “A Change is Gonna Come” and he couldn’t have been more right. As technology continues to grow and improve with the use of Movie, Photoshop, In Design, and Skype among others, things are evolving socially for journalists as well. These social networks may be public relations and marketing departments dream come true social networks has revolutionized the use of media for everyone. Myspace and Facebook are great but the 2006 arrival of Tweeter is the network that has shaken up sports journalism most. Many athletes blog but many more tweet. If Tweeter is not moving fast then how do you explain the 17 million new users gained in April (The American Journalism Review)?

Milwaukee Bucks forward, Charlie Villanueva was tweeting during halftime in a game against the Boston Celtics. Odds are his “tweet” and ESPN’s up to the second updates beat out the local reporter’s typical beat. Shaquille O’Neal leads all sport figures with 1,087,749 followers on Tweeter. Aside from players, leagues and networks are taking advantage of this free marketing outlet. ESPN has a tweeter account and many sports journalism are being asked to utilize Tweeter doing their jobs. Journalists are giving up to the second recaps via tweets and are able to interactively interact with their readers. People have a desire for receiving information quickly and effectively and familiarity with new technology such as Tweeter is essential.

Conclusion

New Media has and continues to impact journalists. That impact can be what you make it to an extent. Journalists can’t continue to be stubborn to these changes in media or they will eventually find themselves out of work. New journalists are in the classroom and taking advantage of learning new technology. Old media is a thing of the past and journalists must find a way to continue to stay relevant, whether it’s by being versatile or excelling in niche fields.
The role of journalists doesn’t have to been seen as being diminished but instead permanently changed. As Tom Hodson suggest, journalists must have a specialty that they do best that will attract them a fan base in readers. Readers and viewers simply have the demand, and bloggers or journalists can meet the demand. A journalist’s expectation has changed and his/her role has as well. We are not on the brinks of the death of sports journalism but journalists are in a hot seat to adapt to adjustments and perform. Journalists have to learn on the fly, as technology and media will not wait while any one-person plays catch up. Competition is intense and survival of the fittest will prosper. You have to run or get ran over in the business. Where media is going cannot be anticipated as changes has come in a spontaneous fashion, what can be said is that journalists must do all they can to stay alert and ready to adjust to the frequent changes in media. Their jobs depend on it.
References

