

Reflections on Communication and Sport: On Fanship and Social Relationships

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Abstract

In this essay, Walter Gantz reflects on the importance of communication and sport and the evolution of his research on fanship and social relationships. Cutting across two overlapping dimensions—physical location and technology—this essay characterizes key ways that sports fanship may be integrally linked with meaningful relationships. Sports viewing at home is often a shared activity, one that is far more likely to maintain or enhance existing relationships than isolate or annoy family members and create significant strife. Sports viewing during holidays can create special frustrations but these, too, seem easily addressed by family members. Out-of-home attention to mediated sports—from sports bars to the workplace—also has a strong social dimension as participants are able to share and affirm their fanship, at times at a cost to productivity. Social media and other interactive technologies (e.g., talk radio, smart phones, the Internet) facilitate sports-related expression and community. Research still needs to be conducted on the social dimension of sports fanship across the span of adult life.

Keywords

sports fanship, televised sports viewing at home, televised sports viewing and holidays, televised sports and family relations, televised sports and covieing, sports fanship and uses of new technology

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On the Importance of Communication and Sports

Triumph, tragedy, spectacle, and sport attract, bind, and separate audiences across the world. We watch spellbound when the walls of tyranny fall; stunned and in disbelief when towers (cities) are shattered by zealots (armies); buoyed with hope—or singed with cynicism—by the soaring or searing rhetoric of campaign politics; and filled with joy or dismay when the team representing our college, city, or country competes on the sports field. Despite fiery words from charismatic coaches, sporting events are not wars; in the big picture, losses are not calamities. Sports does not inflict the death and devastation associated with warfare or cataclysmic natural disasters nor does it trigger shifts in priorities and policies often linked with national elections. Yet, sports matters because it is a multibillion dollar industry driven by tens of millions of fans who open their hearts—and wallets—to follow their favorite players and teams. Sports matters because it is intricately woven into the activities we choose, the products we purchase, the food and drink we ingest, the friendships we make, the bars we frequent, the watercooler conversations we have, and the media we follow and produce.

Sports is important because it has the potential to capture and captivate the attention of the world (e.g., the World Cup) and serve as a common bond, binding people together across gender, race, religious, and political divides. Sports is important because of its ever-increasing presence across media and our apparently insatiable appetite for it. Sports merits study because it is intertwined with commerce and culture, politics and religion, education and entertainment, morality and ethics, science and technology—in all, with mainstream contemporary life across the globe. Scholars across disciplines have been studying sports for decades. The arrival of *Communication & Sport* marks a coming of age in the study of sports—and a home base for those, like me, who have been fascinated by the salience of sports in our lives.

One Person's Journey

I began my career studying the diffusion of important news events but such events, by their nature, were atypical. Like other diffusion researchers, I stepped into action when these events occurred and then looked at the interplay between media and interpersonal sources as news of events spread. Such was the case when I studied the untimely death of Steve Prefontaine, one of America's great athletes (Gantz, Trenholm, & Pittman, 1976). Not surprisingly, athletes were more likely to hear of his death and, because the event was salient to them, more likely to tell others of the one car auto accident that took his life. I studied diffusion of Prefontaine's death because it let me test the role of salience and altruism in the dissemination process: As a dedicated distance runner and lifelong sports fan, I was struck by the number of people who wanted to share and commiserate with me. By the late 1970s, led by skyrocketing interest in the National Football League (NFL), sports had

begun to assume a prominent place in daily life at home, work, school, and play. I saw this in my own home, read about it in the popular press, and listened to colleagues and students describe how, as sports fans, they fit watching sports on TV into their lives. Without giving up news diffusion, I already had stretched to study how people used and fit media (primarily television) into their lives. For me, sports was a perfect focal point for scholarship in that area.

My work with fanship has been primarily descriptive. With Lawrence Wenner, I looked at the motives, concomitant behaviors, and outcomes associated with watching televised sports (Wenner & Gantz, 1989). Wenner and I also looked for gender differences across sports fans and found that while fewer females were fans, those who were fans watched and reacted to televised sports like male fans (Gantz & Wenner, 1995). Yet, the fact remained that men were more likely to be fans and, as a result, more likely to watch sports on TV. This certainly was the case at home: My wife had no interest in sports and little interest in fueling my fanship. We easily worked through this difference over time (without sitting down to join me, my wife let me watch and I cut down sports viewing) but as I read stories in the popular press about “football widows,” I could not help but wonder if sports had a corrosive effect on long-standing relationships. My work here (e.g., Gantz, 1985) suggested otherwise. At least when I collected data in this area, TV seemed to be a shared activity that, for most, played a small but positive role in married life. Without much ado, spouses yielded to or accommodated each other’s interests, even on weekends featuring the competing lure of friends, family, shopping, and NFL football. When interest was shared, watching sports was a bond, something to do together as a couple or family. Indeed, while some fans may prefer to watch alone—no distractions, please!—there is ample evidence that people enjoy watching sports with others, that, for fans, following sports is a distinctly social phenomenon. Fans integrate their passion for sports with family, friends, and colleagues—with like-minded strangers, too—in person at homes, dorms, and bars as well as through traditional media channels such as radio and online.

In this essay, I will describe several ways in which sports fanship is integrally linked with meaningful relationships, including marriage and parenting, and will do that by cutting across two overlapping dimensions—physical location and technology. Before doing that, it is important for the reader to know that when I consider sports fanship, I think of individuals who are consciously and willingly vested in following sports. They watch, read, write, and talk about sports because they care, because a player, team, league, or sport matters to them.

Focus: On Fanship and Social Relationships

The average American household has more televisions than humans. As a result, and with the advent of digital video recorder technology, the TV viewing experience has become increasingly atomized with parents, children, and roommates able to watch what they want on their own set, when they want to watch it, in their own space, by

themselves. On one hand, this may be good as it permits household members to pursue person-specific viewing interests and reduces any number of TV-related conflicts across household members (e.g., what is being watched; who controls the remote; how often channels are changed to avoid ads). Yet, it represents a lost opportunity to connect. For family members, this is important as TV viewing may be a communal experience all can enjoy. This may be particularly true for sports as it generally represents noncontroversial programming (e.g., no sex, no foul language) appropriate for all ages and is best viewed in real time. As I hope to demonstrate, sports viewing at home often is a shared activity, one that is far more likely to maintain or enhance existing relationships rather than isolate or annoy family members and create significant strife.

The Home Viewing Experience

Fans watch sports for the eustress experiences associated with following their team (Raney, 2006). At the same time, fans who are parents have an opportunity to share this commitment with their children, in part accomplished by having children coview. ESPN (2009) reports that when boys aged 2–11 watch televised sports, they typically coview with adults. Others have documented that parental team affiliation contributes to the origination of identification with a sports team (e.g., Wann, Tucker & Schrader, 1996).

Teenagers continue to coview when they watch sports, females more so than males. Coviewing here is likely to be split between family and friends. Detailed surveys or qualitative research is needed to flesh out the nature of sports coviewing among teens. But, it has been suggested that teen–parent coviewing lets teenagers demonstrate their sports expertise and, in that sense, reverse roles and begin to mentor their parents (ESPN, 2009). None of this precludes parent–child conflict about sports—or having children observe sports-viewing behaviors (i.e., screaming/cursing at the set) their parents would prefer not be modeled.

A study of adult “avid” and “die-hard” sports fans suggests that such fans enjoy watching sports in the company of others. They appreciate the social aspect of viewing and feel being a sports fan has a positive effect on their relationships with family and friends (Wann, Friedman, McHale, & Jaffe, 2003). Yet, adult males are more likely to view sports alone than coview, perhaps because they watch a great deal of sports. Adult females are at least as likely to coview as view alone, with coviewing generally with men (ESPN, 2009). This is consistent with data on fanship: More men self-report as fans. It is also consistent with motives for watching televised sports. Nonfans, more often women, are slightly more likely to acknowledge that one reason for watching TV sports is because their friends and family are watching. At least for women, then, viewing sports at home is an experience shared with the men in their lives. We do not know whether this activity is their first or fallback option but coviewing sports appears to be an enjoyable activity nonetheless.

As noted earlier, my own work in this area documented how easily most adults in long-standing intimate relationships (marriages) work through potential conflicts associated with viewing sports. Without breaking into a sweat, those not predisposed to watch sports let their partner watch, watch with them, turn to another TV set in the household, engage in other activities around or outside the house, or convince their partner not to watch (Gantz, Wenner, Carrico, & Knorr, 1995). Accommodation is the rule. Indeed, one initially surprising finding was that a minority of respondents said they did not experience *any* disputes about sports. They knew their spouse well enough to sidestep potential issues associated with viewing sports at home. At the same time, televised sports does create conflicts at home, even among those married for many years. When asked, no less than one in six said they had argued with their spouse because of the way TV sports impacted their relationship, had resented their spouse for watching TV sports, or thought their spouse resented them (Gantz et al., 1995). In a different study looking at the ways married and divorced adults handled conflict in their relationship (Gantz, 2001), I did not have to probe in focus groups to get newlyweds and divorced adults to talk about sports. For several participants, sports viewing acted as a wedge—perhaps an additional stress point in an already troubled relationship—and was used as a weapon during marital conflict.

Home, Sports, and Holidays

Sports have been part of our holiday experience for decades. Years ago, Major League Baseball (MLB) routinely scheduled doubleheaders on major holidays (i.e., Memorial Day, July 4th, Labor Day). When there were only four major college football bowl games (Cotton, Sugar, Rose, and Orange), each was played on January 1, spread across the afternoon and evening to maximize viewership.

Televised sports on holidays intersects with social relationships more significantly than on nonholidays because holidays, like weekends for those who work only during the week, often are reserved for leisure activities, including time with family and friends. Televised sports can limit time available for relationships as well as determine when the fan feels free to socialize. It also can limit interaction around the set so fans can watch without distractions. On holidays, this can be particularly frustrating for nonfans. After all, are not holidays for family and friends? Anecdotal evidence suggests this sort of frustration occurs across the United States on Thanksgiving. For many, Thanksgiving plans are made well in advance so that family members can travel to gather together on this distinctly American, secular holiday. Elaborate meals are planned and then prepared on the days leading to Thanksgiving. NFL Thanksgiving Day football intruded well before television was invented; National Broadcasting Company radio carried the first nationally broadcast Thanksgiving NFL game in 1934. Today, though, the NFL carries three games on Thanksgiving, deliberately extended across the afternoon and evening with no overlap. The upshot is that in households with sports fans, the Thanksgiving meal is relegated to a between-game (or halftime) activity, is eaten quickly, is served with

the volume up loud, or is dished out in front of the TV set. I cannot imagine this particularly pleases those who lovingly prepare the meals. On the other hand, interest in NFL football is so deep and widespread that its final playoff game of the year has become a holiday that all who participate in it appear to enjoy.

Super Bowl Sunday has become an unofficial U.S. holiday with parties planned across the nation. Here, even among nonfans, attention is riveted to the set—now for the ads as well as the game itself. Anticipation of the game rivals any expected event, save perhaps for election night when our country elects its president. For years—and almost without fail—the Super Bowl has been the highest rated TV telecast for the year. Because it is always played on a Sunday—and at a time convenient for the entire country—it is easy to plan a day around the game. So it is that parties are scheduled and, even with elaborate meals, it is understood that the game comes first. Real (1975) captured the hype and spectacle of the event just as the Super Bowl was beginning to capture the entire country's attention. Even then, one motivation for viewing was the communal nature of the experience. Nonfans watched because others were watching; it was the thing to do. Fans and nonfans alike seemed to understand this was an event that carried considerable social currency. It was, as Real noted, “a source of conversation at work, in the neighborhood, at shops, wherever regular or accidental interaction occurs” (Real, 1975, p. 34). There is almost no divisiveness here: In countless households, Super Bowl Sunday is a shared event that reinforces rather than threatens relational bonds. In 1993, the popular press picked up on a claim that domestic violence against women peaked on Super Bowl Sunday. The claim was erroneous. Domestic violence did increase on Super Bowl Sunday but it was a holiday rather than game-day effect and a more significant issue on other holidays.

The Sports Bar Experience

Tens of thousands of sports bars, liberally sprinkled across the country, provide bar owners with extra business and offer fans—and their friends—an opportunity to follow sports in a setting where expressive and collective response is expected and celebrated. Without discounting the salience of drink, sports bars are set up for fans to cheer, groan, jump, stomp, high five, and commiserate with (generally) like-minded others. Patrons begin filling the seats hours before their team plays and carry on with those around them. Rooting in sports bars can approach the cohesive, pro-home team response at the stadium without the cost, time commitment, and hassles associated with going there. In large cities, college graduates are able to find bars that cater to alums from their school, often arranged and marketed by local branches of school-backed alumni associations. Their school's games are on, the crowd filled with fellow alums who, in addition to following their team, enjoy the opportunity to compare notes and reminisce about their years at school. For many at large universities featuring hundreds of majors and thousands of courses each semester, sports

provides the shared experience and ties that bond, a visceral linkage that may, in turn, lead to connections for work and social life outside the bar.

Sports bars provide an opportunity for fans to share, affirm, and legitimize their fanship (Eastman & Land, 1997). They provide an easily established community of like-minded individuals. Even if patrons root for different teams, they stand together as fans, their rituals and overt responses accepted as manifestations of an emotional commitment to a team other fans appreciate and accept. Of course, sports bars do provide an opportunity to imbibe and, in general, bar staff quickly serve the libations fans request for drinking games linked to action of the set. And, for those who need it, alcohol serves as a social lubricant. At a sports bar, with drink in hand, conversations among strangers flow.

Beyond fans, sports bars attract those who wish to socialize and may have nothing better to do. They appeal to all who wish to interact with others and be entertained. Indeed, as is the case at home, nonfans sometimes tag along just for the companionship. Among those who are single, sports bars offer a chance to establish relationships, however fleeting they may be. As one young woman at a college town sports bar noted honestly, "I think this is a great way to meet guys" (Eastman & Land, 1997, p. 169).

The relatively recent profusion of sports bars and the primary functions they have long served are not U.S.-centric phenomena. Weed (2007) characterized English pubs as venues where fans could, as a collective, share the spectating experience much as they would at a stadium. And, as found in the United States, fans would line up hours before major games in order to get good seats for TV viewing when the games began.

Sports at Work

Contemporary workplaces are filled with distractions, many associated with computer technology. From their desks, employees clandestinely e-mail, shop, play games, catch up on news, use social media, and hunt for employment, all at a cost in productivity that worries management. At work, employees also catch up on sports, including updates on their fantasy sports teams. There is a social dimension to fantasy sports and an element of it may be played out at work: Fantasy league players select teams, compare stats and daily/weekly outcomes, and when the season is over celebrate or commiserate with one another. More broadly, though, sports is watercooler conversation. While gloating in victory may infuriate those whose teams lost, conversations about sports are reasonably inclusive, easy, and safe: Most people are fans (using the term loosely); sports often makes headlines (witness the 2012 strike by NFL officials and the controversial calls made by their replacements; cyclist Lance Armstrong's fall from grace following corroborated allegations of systematic doping); and while fans may be quite opinionated and team loyalties run deep, discussions about sports do not involve core beliefs and private behaviors the way politics, religion, and sex do—sports are just sports, but also more interesting than talking about the weather.

Many employees participate in office pools related to sporting events such as the National Collegiate Athletic Association Men's basketball tournament. March Madness pools may be technically illegal in many states but enforcement appears to be lax. Aided by online sites that offer sports data and technical advice, office pools are established across the land and, for 3 weeks, work is at least temporarily put aside so employees can follow the action, keep track of their picks, and talk with each other about the games and the pools. Online reports suggest that nearly 60 million Americans fill out brackets for the tournament, although not all of these are done through work (Boudway, 2012). Lost productivity is an issue, especially during the first week of the tournament when 32 games are played on Thursday and Friday. Online reports suggest workplace focus on the entire tournament may cost businesses from \$175 million to \$1 billion (Clotfelter, 2012). All involved seem aware of this. Last year, a colleague pointed out an online site that had a "boss button": When pressed, it produced an extravagant spreadsheet to make it seem like the employee was focused on work. Another click returned the employee to the action.

Without discounting the cost to businesses, widely shared workplace activities involving sports (e.g., sports pools, watercooler conversations, an afternoon or evening at the ballpark) may provide the camaraderie, shared sense of purpose, and morale managers and administrators work so hard to develop.

Technology, Connectivity Anywhere, and Sports

Fans are intellectually and emotionally vested in sports. It seems natural, then, for fans to want to share their expectations and responses with, at a minimum, like-minded others. Coviewing adds to the energy and excitement of the action on the field and lets fans share opinions or, more colorfully, talk "smack." With modern technology, fans are able to watch and simultaneously communicate with friends 10 or 10,000 miles away. In a modest first foray at this, my colleagues and I found that fans routinely called, texted, and used sites such as Facebook to talk about games as they transpired (Gantz, Fingerhut, & Nadorff, 2012). Texting led the way here, perhaps because it was the least intrusive, required the least effort, and resulted in the speediest feedback. No matter: Each technology lets fans share and enhance their sports viewing experience and stay connected with friends and family.

Calls and texts reflect focused conversation with no more than a small number of individuals judiciously selected for the exchange. Those on both ends of the conversation know each other's affinity for sports as well as their willingness to being interrupted and, perhaps, razed. For years, though, fans have reached out to extended communities using media vehicles at their disposal. For the most part, these efforts are not concurrent with sports programming. Instead, they preview or review games and comment on all personnel and institutions associated with sports. In this brief overview, I will cover terrestrial radio and the Internet.

A branch of talk radio, sports talk radio started to take off in the 1980s and has since become one of the top formats on AM radio. Station managers like this format

because it tends to attract adult men, an audience beloved by many advertisers. At its heart, sports talk radio is a loud, brash, deliberately, and decidedly opinionated format hosted by those able to develop a persona (i.e., Mike and the Mad Dog on WFAN)—perhaps akin to shock jocks on talk radio—that fans appreciate. In addition to conversations with athletes and sports reporters, sports talk radio features calls from fans who ask questions, are quick to showcase, and share their opinions and generally have a hard enough skin to handle the snappy response their hosts may offer. For listeners, sports talk radio provides information, edgy and at times confrontational conversation, and a parasocial connection with their sports teams and the hosts of these programs. These shows seem to provide an important community that can be accessed almost daily, unknown in most ways but intimate nonetheless (Dempsey, 2006; Staples, 1998).

Sponsored by leagues, teams, universities, corporations, and unaffiliated individuals, websites and blogs devoted to sports are now commonplace. Many focus on real teams (e.g., Indianapolis Colts) while others are designed for fantasy sports. Across focal areas, these websites and blogs create and represent communities of fans who develop affinity and loyalty to them.

Competition is central to fantasy sports: Participants select athletes for their fantasy team with the ultimate goal of winning. At the same time, fantasy sports is an interactive, social activity where fantasy league players participate in a draft, trade players, root for their teams and, among those who know each other, trade quips, barbs, I-told-you-so's, and alibis after each update in the action. For many, fantasy leagues are an extension of existing friendship or work-related networks where the process of participation, in and of itself, has great value. Those who participate in long-standing leagues develop ties that, for some, feel like family as players share life stories (e.g., Serazio, 2008). Fantasy leagues do involve self-expression as players build extensive profiles, showcase their winnings, name their teams based on personal preferences and inside jokes, select players based on real-sport favorites and bench players when they are up against their real-sport favorite team (beware bad karma!). These leagues and websites are less about reinforcing one's fandom or social change. Instead, those outcomes are associated with websites and blogs about real teams.

Traditional media deliver top-down, institutionalized coverage of sports. Given the costs associated with winning transmission rights and maintaining high production values and the goal of attracting large audiences to recover those costs, sports programming is formulaic, prepared and delivered by professionals. Fans always have had a voice: At games, their rooting behavior has the potential to affect game play and, perhaps, officiating. Modern technology magnifies fan voices so they can be heard far and wide. Lurking or active participation in blogs and websites provides a connectivity and sense of extended community fans value. It democratizes sports and provides fans with a base of information and influence they would not have as individuals. These forums can break news as well as serve as a bullhorn expressing and galvanizing fan pleasure or disgust. Watts (2008) illustrates fan activism online in her coverage of University of Florida football fans who, angered by the hiring of

Ron Zook as head football coach and never satisfied by his performance in that capacity, waged a long and intense online effort to have him fired.

Overall, social media facilitate sports-related expression, competition, attention, fun, and connectivity. They are likely to supplement primary relationships, enhance one's sense of social worth, reinforce one's commitment to sports, and contribute to feeling part of a meaningful community. Use of social media also appears to increase exposure to sports using traditional media, perhaps one reason why leagues such as the NFL promote and sponsor fantasy league websites. But, the use of social media for fanship comes at a price. As noted earlier, productivity suffers when fans use social media at work. It remains to be seen if, over time, commitment to fantasy leagues erodes loyalty to home town teams, an outcome teams and leagues would find disturbing. Evidence here appears equivocal. Highly involved NFL fans who participate in profootball fantasy leagues have strong team identification and attitudinal loyalty to their favorite team. At the same time, because they are following their fantasy teams, they are less likely to watch that team on television, a behavioral indicant of loyalty (Dwyer, 2011). There is no reason to expect commitment to online sports communities would diminish one's commitment to off-line relationships. But, it does consume time that might otherwise be spent with family, friends, or colleagues.

Looking Ahead

Two years ago, I argued we needed to pay close attention to the ways scholars conceptualize and measure fanship, the central concept driving so much of our research (Gantz, 2011). I also argued we need to move away from college samples as they offered a limited view of fanship across the lifespan. I am working on both issues and hope others are as well. At the same time, I see one topic where studying college samples—actually, studying teenagers and young adults—might provide insights that we can't get when we gather data from people in long-standing intimate relationships. Intimate relationships click for a number of reasons—common values and experiences, shared needs and goals, chemistry, to name a few—and are deeply meaningful and valued. Over time, partners grow to anticipate each other's needs and desires and, in happy relationships, contribute or accommodate to ensure those needs and desires are fulfilled. What happens, though, when relationships are being formed, when those involved have to decide if the relationship warrants a second, third, or fourth date? There is less at stake—and also much less known about each other. Here, differences—trivial or otherwise—may be the subject of conversation and a source of contention, perhaps enough to terminate the relationship. Sports fanship may enter the calculus on either side of the equation, working as a lubricant or barrier. Either way, it strikes me that in studying relationships as they develop or fold, we can learn a great deal about the role of sports fanship in meaningful, intimate relationships.

Data released by ESPN (2009) suggest sports fanship peaks early in life and then gradually abates as people move from their teenage and young adult years to mid-age and elderly life. Yet, the typical fan/viewer of major sports (such as the NFL,

MLB, and the National Basketball Association) is in their 40s. Using data from The ESPN Sports Poll, Luker (2012) argued that interest in sports among Americans over 45 is increasing, including those over 65. The takeaway point here is that fanship extends throughout adult life and, as such, should be examined in the context of the family, work, and friendship networks all adults have. Priorities—and free time—change with parenthood and then again when parents become empty nesters. Motivations for viewing sports—concomitant behaviors, too—may change as one manages work, parenting, and intimate relationships such as marriage and friendships.

We need to deliberately study sports viewing within the home and social context in which we live—and to continue to examine the role of gender as it relates to the social dimension of sports consumption. Marketing researchers routinely tackle the concomitants of fanship and sports viewing across age and other demographic groups, but their work is conducted for corporate clients and kept under lock and key. Survey research can help address the interplay between fanship and home life although for scholars without external funding, collecting data from representative groups of fans (not just the truly passionate ones who frequent interactive sports websites and blogs) will be challenging. As a jumping off or end point, qualitative work also will be valuable here as it is likely to unearth experiences that may not be easily captured with quantitative measures. Ultimately, we need to better understand the social dimension of sports fanship and how the interplay between social context and fanship evolves over time. There is work to be done—and, with *Communication & Sport*, a valuable outlet for topflight work.

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