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SPORT FANDOM IN THE DIGITAL WORLD

Ann Pegoraro

Sport spectatorship is one of the largest forms of leisure behavior in the world today (James and Ridinger, 2002). Large numbers of individuals attend sporting events and refer to themselves as sports fans, and their consumption of sport is increasingly shifting to online platforms. Sports fans are consuming news and other content via social media and mobile devices more than ever, with 26 percent of sports fans using social media to follow leagues, teams, and players in 2012, compared with just 15 percent the previous year (Laird, 2012). Further evidence of the growth in the use of new media by sports fans is the surging usage of mobile platforms to both consume and convey sports content. Fans do not need to attend the game or even congregate with other fans to share the experience. With changes to media, fans can tweet, text, blog, and Facebook, all while watching the game, providing a new and enriched fandom experience. Because media, like fans, are constantly changing, sport media researchers need to be constantly observing and recording these changes. This chapter provides insight into how fans, teams, athletes, and other stakeholders interact and engage in fandom in the digital world. The chapter commences with an examination of how one becomes a sport fan. It then moves on to how sport fandom manifests itself in the new digital world, including uses and gratification of fans and the increasing potential for fan – athlete interaction. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the role of sport fans as content creators and the challenges and opportunities this presents.

How we become sport fans

There is perhaps no one accepted universal measure for fanship mainly owing to the complexity of the concept and how it is manifested. Perhaps the best example to illustrate this is the sport of football. Fans of American football are very different than fans of traditional football (or, as it is known in North America, soccer) given the different origins of each sport and its place in respective societies. Yet each set of fans might exhibit similar attachment to favorite teams and similar sport fan behavior even though the sport they attach to is vastly different. Studies of fans in each of the versions of football will no doubt produce different results relating to online sport fandom activities given the nature of the two sports, the historic

routes to fandom, and geographic differences. Fanship, therefore, is not a universal concept and cannot be captured easily (Gantz, 2011).

There has been more of a consensus on how we become fans. In his seminal work on the topic, Wann (1995, 1997) identified eight common motivations for becoming a sport fan: group affiliation, family, aesthetic, self-esteem, entertainment, escape, economic, and eustress. Many of these motivations are exactly as they appear; an individual becomes a sport fan through the desire to spend more time with his or her family (Gantz, 1981; Gantz and Wenner, 1995; Raney, 2006; Wann, 1995, 1997; Wenner and Gantz, 1989), or to become part of a larger group and share the experience with something larger than themselves such as other fans, a community or their nation (Branscombe and Wann, 1991; Gantz and Wenner, 1995; Melnick, 1993; Sloan, 1989; Wann, 1995, 1997). Others simply enjoy either the aesthetic aspects of sport (Sloan, 1989; Wann, 1995, 1997) or the entertainment value of sport (Gantz, 1981; Gantz and Wenner, 1995; Sloan, 1989; Wann, 1995, 1997; Zillmann, Bryant, and Sapolsky, 1989). Escape can also be a motivator, where fans who are bored or dissatisfied with their life use sport fandom to temporarily forget (Sloan, 1989; Wann, 1995, 1997). Another motive for sport fandom is economics, where sport fans seek to financially gain from the opportunities to gamble on sport (Frey, 1992; Gantz and Wenner, 1995; Wann, 1995, 1997). Many sport fans seek out sport as a way to increase their self-esteem – your team wins – you win (Branscombe and Wann, 1994; Gantz, 1981; Sloan, 1989; Wann, 1995, 1997). And the last motivation for sport fandom is eustress, a positive form of stress that can stimulate and energize a sport fan through the anxiety involved from worrying whether your team will win or not (Branscombe and Wann, 1994; Gantz and Wenner, 1995; Raney, 2006; Sloan; Wenner and Gantz, 1989; Wann, 1995, 1997).

While not all of the eight motivations are present in sport fans at any given time, group affiliation and self-esteem are almost always in play and can form the core explanation for fan behavior (King, 2004). Historically, most fans have consumed sport in group settings and have used sport fandom to build positive connections with other fans, thereby increasing self-esteem. In the past, stadiums, arenas, bars and office water coolers have provided vast stretches of common ground for sport fans to gather in groups and form connections. This physical common ground or community is now greatly augmented by the boundless non-physical community provided by the Internet; fans can now gather in virtual groups to express their fandom.

Fandom in the digital world

With the growth of the Internet, sport fans have experienced an increased opportunity to interact with other fans, with teams, and with athletes. The various avenues (for example, message boards, social networking sites) available on the Internet allow fans choose different environments to connect in and engage in fandom related activities. So where do fans go? And for what purpose? To answer these questions, researchers first looked to how sport fans used the Internet for fandom and what they sought from these activities.

Early research on sport fan behavior in the digital world has focused on uses and gratifications theory to help to explain the extensive growth in sport fan use of Internet platforms. Researchers, focusing on non-sport related online behavior, have identified various traditional motivations behind online consumption. These motives include accessing information and technical knowledge (Raacke and Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Ruggiero, 2000), communicating

with like-minded individuals (Raacke and Bonds-Raacke, 2008), and finding entertainment and diversion (Ruggiero, 2000). As Ruggiero noted, unique to online consumption is the motive of developing personal identities and keeping in touch with the global world. In applying the same theory to digital sport world, researchers found many parallel motives for sport fans use of the Internet. The motives of gathering information and technical knowledge, together with receiving entertainment and diversion were found when examining digital media use from a sport perspective (Hur, Ko, and Valacich, 2007; Seo and Green, 2008). Researchers such as Hur and colleagues and Seo and Green found that fans use the Internet to learn about teams and athletes and express team support.

Some of the first work on uses and gratifications theory applied to sport fan media use focused on message boards or online forums. Clavio (2008a) found that nonsubscribers used message boards primarily to gather information on their favorite teams and to interact with other fans while subscribers, who are more vested fans, also used message boards to gather information, but they spent more time on the message boards, and made more posts on message boards than nonsubscribers. Clavio (2008b) also delved into more detail on this online fan behavior. This study revealed four dimensions that explained fan behavior. The first, interactivity comprised fans giving input and opinions, participating in discussions, communicating with fellow fans, and sharing information, explained the largest portion of fan-reported behavior. The second dimension involved fans gathering information on the message boards which was posted by other fans. The third dimension encompassed a variety of uses of message boards that could be categorized as diversionary; for example, talking about other topics (politics, religion), and keeping in touch with college friends and their alma mater. Argumentation, the fourth dimension, included activities such as fans engaging in trash talk and arguing with other users on the forums.

The second part of applying uses and gratifications theory involves gratifications or what enjoyment the sport fan is looking for from using the Internet. Again, Clavio (2008b) found three key dimensions to gratifications with the acquisition, quality, and uniqueness of content available or premium information dimension being the first. Secondly, sport fans were interested in the quality of the communal aspects of interactions with other users, and the premium quality of those users. The third dimension included the motivation to support one's school or the company running the sites, or patronage motivation.

In applying uses and gratifications theory to one of the newest and fastest growing digital media platforms, Twitter, has also produced some similar results. Clavio and Kian (2010) found that the majority of Twitter followers on an athlete's Twitter feed were participating because of their affinity for the athlete and not just because of their affinity for Twitter. Other individuals followed the athlete because of their perceived celebrity or importance. A third factor that explained why fans were following the athlete was interaction, both with the athlete as well as with the larger Twitter community. The study found that the most salient uses of the Twitter feed for respondents dealt primarily with personal affinity for the athlete, perhaps illustrating the unique ability of Twitter to provide that inside look at an athlete's lives. Pegoraro (2010) and Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, and Greenwell (2010) studied athletes' use of Twitter, and both studies found that the majority of tweets were interacting with other users, including fans, which is in line with Ruggiero (2000) who asserted that individuals use the Internet to interact with other users and keep in touch with the larger world.

Early research into why and how fans use the Internet for their fandom activities, therefore, indicates that, to gather in-depth knowledge about their favorite team and related activities,

fans are more likely to go to fan-driven message boards, team websites, and online forums. To find out what their favorite athlete is up to, fans are more likely to turn to social networking sites (such as Twitter, Facebook). These early studies also illustrate that Twitter represents yet another forum in which fans can associate with teams and interact with their favorite players, providing fans what they crave: information and interactivity.

Online transference of offline sport fandom

As noted in Wann (1995, 1997), sport fans all follow similar pathways to becoming a sport fan. Included in the motivations for sport fandom are self-esteem and group affiliation, two factors that can lead to becoming a highly identified fan. But what happens when your team loses – how does a fan ensure this loss does not affect his or her self-esteem? Over time, all fans have developed self-preservation strategies to deal with losses. Cialdini, *et al.* (1976) first introduced the notions of fans *basking in reflected glory* (BIRG). The authors noticed that after football games where their university won, students were more likely to wear school branded merchandise and would refer to themselves as part of the team – “We won!” Conversely, when a team lost, fans show a tendency to put distance between the team and themselves so as to not be identified as a loser. This is referred to as *cutting off reflected failure* or CORFing (Wann and Branscombe, 1990; Wann, Hamlet, Wilson, and Hodges, 1995). CORFing behavior allows the highly identified fan to maintain self-esteem after a loss and Wann and Branscombe labeled BIRGing and CORFing tendencies as a means for fans to demonstrate strategic self-preservation. A second type of self-preservation strategy was identified by Wann, *et al.* (1995) and labeled as *cutting off future failure* (COFF) where fans of successful teams keep their celebrations moderate, to preserve their ego in the future should their teams fail in upcoming games. Research also suggested that sport fans may use a fourth strategy to restore a positive social identity following a team defeat – *blasting* – which involves deriding the opponent, and more specifically their fans (Branscombe and Wann, 1994; Cialdini and Richardson, 1980).

Sports fans express their affiliations with sport teams in several ways, including public displays of their fandom on personal websites, fan forums, and blogs (End, 2001), wearing team clothing (Cialdini, *et al.*, 1976; Madrigal, 2000), and following games fanatically throughout the season. Research into sport fan behavior in the digital era suggests that fans increasingly use the various platforms provided by the Internet to engage in traditional offline fan behavior, including BIRGing, CORFing, COFFing and Blasting. Sheldon (1999) found that subscribers to a newsgroup for the Green Bay Packers were highly identified with the team and that they were less likely to BIRG or CORF but rather would use the newsgroup as a way to share the traditional values of being a Packer fan. Joinson (2000) studied soccer fans and found that these fans are more likely to access their team’s web site following a win than after a loss thereby exhibiting traditional BIRGing behavior. In studying fans for the National Football League (NFL), End (2001) found that these fans use online message boards to BIRG and blast opponents; specifically, they will post more messages following a win by their team than after a loss. Interestingly, a greater proportion of blasting messages were posted after victories rather than losses, suggesting that, in some respects, fans were using blasting as an extended form of BIRGing.

In two studies of soccer fans BIRGing, CORFing and blasting behavior was identified. Boen, Vanbeselaere, and Feys (2002) used registered traffic from websites of respective soccer

teams following championship game outcomes to measure tendencies for BIRGing and CORFing. As expected, the authors found the team websites had significantly more visitors after a win than after a loss. The second study by Bernache-Assollant, Lacassagne, and Braddock (2007) investigated the online behavior of highly identified soccer fans on fan-based internet communities found traditional BIRGing behavior, but these fans failed to engage in traditional blasting behavior, such as overly criticizing other teams or fans.

Berg and Harthcock (2008) investigated fan behavior in the online forum for men's basketball at *CSTV.com* during an NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament ("March Madness"). Their findings indicated that, as offline fans do, online fans engaged in behaviors such as blasting and BIRGing. Online blasting and BIRGing behavior was principally evident in the screen names chosen by fans the forum. These behaviors were also evident in the signature lines of fan postings. In another study, Porter, Wood, and Benigni (2011) monitored the traffic and analyzed the content of fan-based internet communities to document BIRGing, CORFing or COFFing in blogs, posts or other types of messages displayed by identifiable fans. Fans posts, when analyzed, were found to be 29 percent positive, 31 percent negative and 40 percent neutral. The authors found that fans spend more time on fan-based internet communities in blasting opposing teams' coaches or players than those on their own team. Also, in a second study related to NFL fans, Spinda (2011) examined the self-reported BIRGing and CORFing strategies of these fans, including online behavior. Results indicated that fans demonstrated online support or BIRGing by posting messages online to show support for their teams and chat with other fans online following a win. These same fans demonstrated CORFing behavior by failing to post a message online after a loss and reporting that they are less likely to chat online following a loss.

Gantz, Fingerhut, and Nadorff (2012) investigated the viewing habits of sport fans focusing on whether they used new digital platforms to augment their television sport viewing. Fans who participated in the study indicated that, for some games: 47 percent said that they simultaneously followed the game online; 53 percent said that they called other people during the game; 67 percent said that they texted other people; and 47 percent said that they used social media sites to talk about the game. Even if fans are watching the game on television alone, they are still connected to other fans through new technology. In the study, fans indicated there were four main ways in which the social uses of technology and digital platforms made the game more meaningful or interesting. First, fans liked to immediately share their reactions or feelings related to the game, and secondly, they liked to use the technology to gather information on the reactions of other fans. Thirdly, fans used these technologies to engage in trash talking and gloating behavior when their team won, and finally fans felt these technologies allowed them to feel more connected, providing a sense of community that viewing the game alone does not provide. Fans in the study also engaged in BIRGing and CORFing behavior – when their favorite team won, fans spent almost twice as much time following up using media then they did when their team lost. When their team won, fans also spent twice as much time texting with friends about the game.

Therefore, it would appear that research has been able to demonstrate that sport fans are indeed using new media to engage in typical sport fandom behavior and have taking some traditional sport fan strategies directing into the digital world. Also, new media has allowed sport fans to stay connected even while watching a sporting event alone.

Fan–athlete interactions in the digital world

As fans use of digital media for fandom related activities increases, researchers have also noted the potential of platforms, such as blogs and Twitter, to become the new mechanism for parasocial interactions between fans and athletes (Sanderson and Kassing, 2011). Parasocial interactions involve fans interacting with a media figure as if he/she was an actual acquaintance, resulting in contact that resembles actual social interactions (Giles, 2002). New media, and in particular, Twitter suggests the possibility of interaction is now real. In their work, Marwick and boyd (2011) studied the practice of celebrity, through appearance and ‘backstage’ access, documenting how celebrity practitioners used Twitter for this purpose. Their study revealed that celebrity practitioners reveal what appears to be personal information on Twitter to create a sense of intimacy with fans. As noted by Marwick and boyd, these practitioners also “publicly acknowledge fans and use language and cultural references to create affiliations with followers” (Marwick and boyd, 2011, p. 139). Further, the tweeting of interactions with other celebrities and personalities give fans the impression they are getting a candid and uncensored look at the lives of these individuals, perhaps revealing the person behind the celebrity.

These concepts have also been studied in a sport context given that many athletes today enjoy a celebrity status in society. Social media has become the predominant choice for athletes and fans to engage in parasocial interactions. In some of the first work in this area, Sanderson (2008) investigated incidents of parasocial interaction occurring on the blog of National Basketball Association (NBA) owner, Mark Cuban, during the time period he spent competing on the popular celebrity-based television dancing show. The research illustrated that fans were highly vested in Cuban’s performances on the show, procrastinating over work and family responsibilities to ensure they could watch him live. Fans went as far as to initiating campaigns to increase fan voting for Cuban to remain on the show. Kassing and Sanderson (2009) investigated fan postings on a blog run by cyclist Floyd Landis for his comeback bid during the 2006 Tour de France. Again in this work, fans were found to contribute posts reflective of typical parasocial interactions – posting encouragement, praise, providing congratulations and actively giving advice to the athlete.

In addition to studying blogs, sport communication scholars have also studied Twitter, owing to the greater opportunity for fan–athlete interaction on this micro-blogging platform. Twitter has let fans feel closer to athletes and more involved in their day-to-day lives. Kassing and Sanderson (2010) studied fan–athlete interaction during the Giro d’Italia and found that cyclists in the race were directly interacting with fans via Twitter. The cyclists would invite fans to participate in merchandise giveaways and take their suggestions for warm-up music. The cyclists also provided a behind the scenes look at what it is like to ride a major tour including riding at high speeds and through dangerous conditions. Furthermore, two early studies on athletes’ use of Twitter by Pegoraro (2010) and Hambrick, *et al.* (2010) indicated that athletes were primarily using Twitter as a mechanism to respond to fans and talk about their personal lives more so than for formal marketing purposes, leading Pegoraro to suggest the potential important role of Twitter to increase fan–athlete interactions. Thomas (2011) also confirmed the emotional importance of Twitter for athletes to share aspects of their personal life such as pictures or important announcements, to share their thoughts, or send inspirational messages to their fans. The findings of these early studies on fan–athlete parasocial interactions through social media further support that the findings of Marwick and boyd (2011) are applicable to sport as well.

Sport fans as content creators

How sports fans express their fandom through words and actions has changed dramatically with the growth in the Internet and social networking sites. Digital media and associated technology now provide a more direct link between fans and their favorite teams, athletes and other fans and allowing new relationships and interactions that were not possible before. Sport fans used to physically gather in locations like pubs, stadiums, restaurants, private homes to engage in fandom related activities such as debating sport topics, arguing whose favorite team/athlete was better and watching the game together. Now, these same fans can meet online to engage in these same activities, providing for both an enriched sport fandom experience, as well as unpredictable group dynamics, as the gathering of fans online can be much larger than physical gatherings and cross regional and national boundaries (Hutchins and Rowe, 2012).

According to scholars, online groups or crowds of sport fans are not homogenous groups and can represent, "by turns or in combination, a source of harsh criticism, an exploitable and profitable source of free labour, and an economic force that claims ownership of sport" (Hutchins and Rowe, 2012, p. 101). Traditionally, sport fans have been non-influential in the production of sport-related content, acting as consumers of content and are uninvolved in how content gets shaped and presented (Sanderson and Kassing, 2011). As noted by Clavio (2008b), the unique characteristics of online message boards that allow for users to participate both as the creators and the consumers of content should be seen as a new area for scholars to investigate. The challenge, therefore, is how to deal with sports fans that are large producers of sport related content in the digital world but are also virtually impossible to control and who demonstrate minimal regard for the norms of practice in the sport media world.

The content produced by sport fans is referred to as user-generated content and is defined as "to media content created or produced by the general public rather than by paid professionals and primarily distributed on the Internet" (Daugherty, Eastin, and Bright 2008, p. 16). User-generated content exists in a variety of forms, including content uploaded to social networking sites (such as Facebook, LinkedIn), online forums (such as myfootballforum.com); blogs (such as SB Nation); micro-blogs (such as Twitter); photographs and videos uploaded to file-sharing sites (such as YouTube, Flickr); and information uploaded to wikis (for example, Wikipedia) (Glickman and Fingerhut, 2011). Today, sport media production is increasingly driven less by formal publishers and more by sports fans or the general public. The growth in user-generated content is mind-boggling, with predictions indicating that by 2013 there will be nearly 135 million consumers of such content in the US alone, and more than 114 million user-generated content creators, accounting for almost 52 percent of all US internet users (Verna, 2009). Both of these numbers are expected to significantly increase over the coming years.

Understanding this phenomenon and the inability to control fans and user-generated content, some sport organizations have embraced it. While many factors may contribute to a sport organization's growth in followers, the authenticity of having fans talk to fans definitely has a role to play. In Watts' study on the Florida Gator Nation online, the scholar found that fans' discussions on team focused websites "allow them to become active participants in reporting team related news, express their opinions, and even become activists for causes in this online town hall" (Watts, 2008, p. 243). Indeed, the rise of digital media means that fans can now be reporters right alongside those with official press passes, and in fact increasingly sport websites' writers are being granted the same official credentials as members of traditional

media. Fans can sometimes take the role of *reporter* very seriously, creating trouble for athletes, especially when it turns to these fans reporting of an athlete's behavior. For example, Sanderson (2009) examined how fans alerted organizations to the conduct of professional athlete's that took place on personal time and at times in what the athlete considered a private space. Fans are likely to engage in such reporting behaviors owing to their identification with a specific team, and their perception that an athlete's behavior can be detrimental to the team would prompt them to publically report it (Sanderson and Kassing, 2011).

Conclusion

Research has found that online media have the greatest effect on the association between fan-identification and self-esteem, followed by broadcast, mobile phones, and print media (Phua, 2010). The Internet has risen to prominence over more traditional media because of its numerous advantages: the ability to disregard both time and geography constraints, thereby making it truly global media, and the infinite bandwidth which puts no foreseeable limits on its growth (Boase and Wellman, 2006). These features of the Internet are especially useful for sports fans because they can access unlimited information about their favorite sport, team, athlete, regardless of time, and they can interact with like-minded fans from around the world (Phua, 2010). Now, sport fans can also watch live streaming of games online, as well as access online versions of sport related print media.

The Internet is home to numerous types of websites focused on sport fans and their fandom activities. Sports leagues and teams maintain websites that provide up-to-date statistics, game schedules, and news. Sport broadcast networks maintain online sites where fans can stream live video and view instant replays. YouTube has allowed any athlete or team to create highlight videos for fan consumption. Online fan forums and message boards allow sport fans to publicly meet other fans, display their team loyalty and employ self-esteem maintenance strategies such as BIRGing and CORFing. On Facebook, Twitter, and blogs, sport fans can get almost instantaneous news on athletes, teams, and leagues. On these same sites, fans can become content creators and even assume the role as reporter. It is important for sport organizations to know what drives individuals to participate and create content, what types of content sport fans are producing and how is this changing the world of online sport fandom. Globally, sport fans in the digital world are making their voices heard by athletes, by teams, and by other fans.

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