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10

LOCAL TV SPORTS AND THE INTERNET

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In a very short time, Ashley Russell made quite a name for herself in sportscasting. In 2012, Russell hosted *Yahoo! Sports Minute*, a program that received 22 million page hits per month; an unrelated fan web page dedicated in her honor received nearly half a million views. Another sportscaster, Ines Sainz (a sports broadcaster who made news in 2010 after she was harassed by players for the New York Jets) had more than 300,000 followers on Twitter in 2012, and Seattle-based sportscaster Brad Adam had such popularity that even his hair had its own Twitter page ("Top 11," 2010).

Russell, Sainz and Adam all show how the Internet has impacted local television sports. Before the web, local sportscasters could expect to reach only those audiences within range of their station's signal. Today, the Internet has opened up new global opportunities, and in many senses, the local sports is not so "local" anymore. But this same shift toward wider audiences also negatively impacted the local sports segment, and in some ways threatened its survival. This chapter addresses the issues related to local television sports and the Internet, and what affect those issues had in the sports media environment.

Background

From a television perspective, sports have been a constant source of programming almost from the beginning of local news. WNBT television in New York signed on the air in July 1941 and its very first telecast was a professional baseball game ("NBC history," 2003). In developing local newscasts to suit their audiences, stations usually included sports and weather. In 1961, for example, WKMG started the first full-time news department in Orlando, Florida, and its newscast included a sports report by Frank Vaught ("The history of," 2003).

Sports became an important part of local television, especially in those early days. "Television got off the ground because of sports," said pioneering television sports director Harry Coyle. "Today, maybe, sports need television to survive, but it was just the opposite when it first started" ("Sports and television," 2012). Local television news grew into a ratings powerhouse in the 1970s, at which point it became the favored source of news for most Americans

and was frequently producing 60 percent of a station's overall profit (Hallin, 1990). According to Brady (2003: 8), "For the audience, local TV news is a habitual thing. Sitting at home each evening, we tune in in search of the familiar."

But the familiar began to change in the 1980s with the growth of cable, the rise of ESPN and the gradual fragmentation of the local sports audience. As cable and satellite penetration increased dramatically, the multiplicity of channels gave sports audiences real choice for the first time. When it began in 1979, ESPN had a modest 1.3 million subscribers, but by 2012 that number had grown to more than 100 million (Amin, 2012). Local sports broadcasters, often limited to a few minutes of content in a newscast, found it hard to compete with outfits like ESPN that offered sports 24 hours per day. As a result, "There is little doubt that broadcasters and main-stream outlets have seen their audiences erode in favor of newer alternatives" (Webster and Ksiazek, 2012: 39).

As that erosion cut dramatically into local newsroom profitability, television executives began reassessing the role of sports within the newscast, especially in light of research that suggested sports actually ranked near the bottom of reasons as to why people watched local news ("Journalism and," 1998). According to Paul Conti, who spent several years as a local news director, "The people that process money say, 'Why are we putting this much energy and money to sports coverage if only 30 percent of the audience cares?' That's been a bad thing for local sports" (Dougherty, 2012). In many television markets, time for local sports was substantially reduced or the segment was dropped entirely.

Local sports TV and blogging

The emergence of the Internet as a newsroom tool in the late 1990s came at a time when local television sports were going through a difficult period. At that time, the local sportscast had been static for several years, with little or no change in style, presentation and content (Schultz and Sheffer, 2004). Such rigidity belied what was going on in television as a whole. The development of digital technology created a media environment defined by more channels and options, high speed communication, and above all, consumer choice and empowerment (Poindexter and McCombs, 2001). "Moving from broadcast TV to broadband TV changes the whole industry," said Moshe Lichtman of IPTV (Levy, 2005).

Rather than trying to change the sports segment to meet modern demands, many local television executives found it easier, and more cost efficient, to simply get rid of it. In 2005, WTEN in Albany, New York, eliminated the traditional anchored sports segment at the end of the newscast and instead mixed sports stories into the body of the news (McGuire, 2005). That same year, WDSU in New Orleans did the same thing with its sports segment in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. At KPNX in Phoenix, the time for sports was reduced and the station began to use sports talent to cover general news stories (Buch and Dupont, 2003). In other cities, including large markets such as Las Vegas, Tampa and Virginia Beach, the sports segment was dropped entirely.

During this winnowing process, other stations turned to the Internet as a possible lifeline for struggling sports segments. The Internet seemingly offered bigger audiences and a way of interacting with sports consumers, who often use the mediated experience to build strong attachments to their favorite players and teams (Wann, 1997). One of the earliest interactive Internet opportunities was the web log, or blog, in which local sports journalists could offer information and opinions several times a day. It also allowed for viewers to respond to postings and engage in real-time interactive conversations with the local sports journalist. In effect, blogging is essentially a technological extension of sports talk radio, which has succeeded because

of its ability to create a social community through discussion and engagement (Tremblay and Tremblay, 2001; Haag, 1996). Most bloggers seem to be very similar demographically to the sports audience as a whole (Lenhart and Fox, 2006).

But early research into blogging (Schultz and Sheffer, 2007) suggested that, at least initially, the introduction of blogging to local sports journalism met with resistance and negativity. Additionally, such studies indicated that that little, if any, change was taking place and the impact of such change was minimal. This was attributed to journalists' perceptions that blogging had little value in terms of contribution to the media outlet or personal development. It could also have been related to age, professional experience, and entrenched work roles that evolved over a period of decades (Deuze, 2003; Sigal, 1973).

Part of the resistance was based on the fact that blogging was an additional layer of work for sports journalists at no extra pay. There was also a sense among sports journalists that their outlet managers required the additional work without providing any training or direction in terms of how to implement it. In 2007, one sports journalist observed, "Our management has a seemingly unique take on blogging. Do it, but don't expect us to check it, read it or even edit it very closely. That has been very frustrating" (Schultz and Sheffer, 2007: 71). By nature, blogs are intended to be personal, subjective and opinionated (Trammell and Keshelashvili, 2005; Bowman and Willis, 2003), which further puts them at odds with traditional journalistic values. "Blogging as it has evolved has been very different from conventional reporting," said media ethics professor Jane Kirtley. "Blogs are not intended to be objective. They are supposed to be opinionated, snarky and in your face – and that's not the way the mainstream media usually goes about reporting" (Hull, 2006/2007).

Many television managers ignored these distinctions, causing more friction for sports journalists. According to one television news director, "Blogging allows the ability to write without the fear of affiliation and concern for objectivity. With traditional journalists, it challenges them to actually form an opinion where usually it might just be a few thoughts here or there on an event. We want opinions" (Sheffer and Schultz, 2009: 14). This same research indicated that many managers were rigid and unwilling to listen to negative feedback from their own journalists.

Just as internal forces reduced the impact of local sports blogging, so too did external forces, as many fans began blogging on their own. The growth of digital technologies allowed anyone to create and maintain a blog, which proliferated rapidly (Stern, 2010). Technorati, a website that measures blog use, estimated that in 2012 there were at least 122 million blogs on the Internet, many of which were sports-oriented blogs created by fans.

The power of fan-based blogs was demonstrated by *SB Nation*, which in 2012 described itself as "a collection of more than 300 individual communities, each offering high quality year-round coverage and conversation led by fans who are passionate about their favorite teams, leagues or sports. By empowering fans, SB Nation has become the largest and fastest growing grassroots sports network" ("SB Nation," 2012). The site became so popular that it hosted an audience of more than 20 million unique visitors per month and received \$10.5 million in funding from a group of media investors (Ingram, 2010). Its success confirmed the work of Burton (1999), who noted that while the media use new technologies as a means of increasing audience, these same technologies might cause audiences to abandon the local media. Thus, blogging became a double-edged sword for local sports broadcasters. It allowed them to reach and interact with larger audiences, but many of these same audiences then ignored the local sportscast and created their own rival content.

The rise of social media

Not long after blogging became popular, local sportscasters had to deal with a new wave of Internet applications. Social media – Facebook, Twitter and other similar services – exploded in the cultural consciousness and once again forced local television sports to adapt. “I thought the social networking sites were strictly a phenomenon of teenagers and young kids,” said television news director Bob Jordan, “(but) it’s now the primary way a lot of people communicate, share and obtain information. Not to be in that space would be just the dumbest thing anyone could do, if you’re in the communications business” (Petner, 2009, para. 5, 6).

Social media refers to the interactive media technologies that allow consumers to create and disseminate their own content, connect with media outlets and other networked users, and voice their opinions on any number of topics, often in real time. Roughly 2.4 billion people, more than one out of every three on the planet, use the Internet, and social media usage has exploded (Internet usage statistics, 2013). In 2012, Facebook passed one billion users while Twitter, the social-networking site that lets people share 140-character messages, was used by 13 percent of all online adults in the US (Moire, 2012). Use of Twitter by people in the 25–34 age group doubled in just two years (Womack and Pulley, 2010). According to Solis (2009), Twitter and social media are powerful platforms to broadcast news, crowd-source stories, and expand the media’s role and relevance.

Social media seem especially relevant in the sports world, where Gregory (2009) noted that Twitter and other such technologies have the potential to permanently alter the athlete–fan interaction. In 2012, there were 3.8 million people following the NBA Twitter site, while 3.4 million were following the Real Madrid soccer team. The NFL had 2.8 million followers (“Top 100,” 2012). In 2012, the largest athlete following belonged to soccer stars Cristiano Ronaldo (14.2 million), Kaka (13.4 million followers), and NBA player LeBron James (6.6 million) (“Top 10,” 2012). “We’re hitting (Twitter) hard,” said NBA player Chris Bosh. “You can put up what you’re doing. Or if you have a question, you’d be surprised how much people know. You can be, like, ‘I need directions to this spot. People will tell you’” (quoted in Feschuk, 2009, para. 5).

As with blogging, the growth of social media presented opportunities and challenges for local television sports. Interactive technologies made it easier to communicate with audiences, but they also made it easier for athletes to bypass the mainstream media. When former baseball star Barry Bonds was under federal investigation related to possible steroid use, he never talked to sports reporters, and communicated to fans only through his blog. Former NBA star Shaquille O’Neal was especially proactive in the social media, managing his image through the help of advisor Amy Jo Martin. When O’Neal announced his retirement from the NBA in 2011, social media allowed him to break the news without going through traditional media channels. “He had full control of when, where and how he wanted to make that announcement,” said Martin. “No press releases needed. It was about him using this influence he had built to communicate directly with his fans” (quoted by Ortiz, 2011, para. 20).

O’Neal’s announcement showed how social media had assumed the role traditionally held by local broadcasters. Social media reduced the sports/news cycle from days and hours to minutes and seconds. As a result, stories no longer wait for the 6 o’clock news; they funnel immediately through Twitter and Facebook. “When I first started in the ‘90s, you waited until the 6 and 11 o’clock news to get the scores and highlights,” said former sportscaster Brian Sinkoff. “You were pretty much planted by your TV at 6:20 and 11:20. With the boom of the Internet and 24-hour cable outlets, now everyone is able to get their scores virtually instantly” (Dougherty, 2012).

Much like the attitudes toward blogging, some sports journalists resisted social media, especially older journalists (Schultz and Sheffer, 2010). However, others began to incorporate social media in various ways. Obviously, Twitter is an ideal platform for breaking stories and almost all local sports outlets used it for that purpose. But compared to their print counterparts, local broadcast sports journalists saw the value of Twitter as a stand-alone tool and used it in newer ways. (Schultz and Sheffer, 2010). They recognized the ability of Twitter to more closely connect to fans and make sports journalism more direct and interactive. Broadcasters also used Twitter and Facebook to promote the journalists' work on other platforms. In other words, they announced upcoming stories through social media as a means to drive traffic to the local sportscasts.

While many sports journalists said they used social media primarily for breaking news and promotion, a look at their actual social media use showed something different. An investigation (Sheffer and Schultz, 2010) into Twitter use showed that while only 33 percent of sports journalists admitted to using the platform for opinion and commentary, in actuality 58 percent of analyzed posts were considered to be some form of opinion. Some comments had nothing to do with sports, such as the television sports reporter who tweeted, "It literally took me 3-and-a-half hours to mount a clock to the wall. Living room wall is riddled with holes like we just got drive-by'd" (Sheffer and Schultz, 2010: 480).

This type of opinion and commentary could be dismissed as inconsequential, but it may also reflect how technologies like Twitter began to reshape sports communication. Given that it is primarily a social networking tool, Twitter embodies the concepts of personal conversation and dialogue (even if the conversation involves millions of people). Conversation often includes rumor, gossip, innuendo and other techniques that are typically discouraged by the professional journalistic community. The advent of radio and television did not necessarily threaten journalistic standards because they were seen simply as new ways of distributing traditional information. But in the case of Twitter, McLuhan (1964) may be correct in saying that the medium is the message: a new way of communicating rather than just a new distribution system. According to Johnson (2009), Twitter adds "... a second layer of discussion and [brings] a wider audience into what would [be a] private exchange. We're having a genuine, public conversation that extends far beyond our family and our next-door neighbors" (paras 10 and 12).

The challenge for local sports television

Historically, change in television sports has been incremental. It took years for such transitions as black-and-white pictures to color, film to videotape, and analog transmission to digital. The transition to digital took decades, and even with all that time to prepare, television broadcasters had difficulty adjusting to the new environment. Local news and sports broadcasters dealt with a similarly monumental change in the Internet, although the change seemed to happen overnight. Thus, many in the television industry struggled with issues related to the Internet and how to best use the technology and its assorted applications within the context of local sports television.

One huge issue was that of cost and monetization. National sports media outlets such as ESPN and *Sports Illustrated* quickly leveraged their massive audiences into Internet millions. By 2012, ESPN received 18 million unique page hits per month during football season and its NFL site doubled that ("Ahead of," 2010). But that windfall did not necessarily trickle down to the local level. Internet advertising was only a small part of revenue at many television stations, which still view the newscast as the main economic engine. WFAA-TV in Dallas,

Texas, traditionally had some of the highest-rated news programming in the country, but as of 2012 still derived 96 percent of its revenue from television advertising and re-transmission agreements, while only 4 percent came from the Internet. "We don't make a dime on social media such as Facebook," WFAA general manager Mike Devlin said at the time. "We have to figure out how to monetize it; we may not be able to. Our newsroom costs \$15–16 million in salaries and equipment. How are you going to pay for that with 4 percent?" (M. Devlin, personal communication, July 11, 2011).

While television managers worried about the financial implications of the Internet, sports journalists tried to figure out how to incorporate the new medium into their traditional work roles. The job of the local sports reporter changed drastically in the Internet era. Much of the reporter's success depends on access to athletes, coaches and organizations, and the ability to turn such access into exclusive, compelling content for audiences. The Internet shifted control of access from reporter to the newsmaker, who could then circumvent the local television station and newspaper in any number of ways. Sports reporters must now include Twitter, Facebook and other similar sites into their daily reporting routines. Graham Watson, who blogged football for ESPN, admitted, "You wake up at 7 a.m. and put your face into the computer until 10 p.m. It's a grueling, demanding job and burnout is a real danger" ("Ahead of," 2010).

The new environment also required speed, which has created some concerns related to ethics and credibility. The need to get information out quickly to a demanding audience, especially via social media, put a tremendous strain on the traditional journalistic tenets of accuracy, fact-checking and deliberation. "We're losing the vetting process and a degree of journalistic integrity," said sportscaster Reggie Rivers in 2010. "There's no time to consider or edit anything" ("Ahead of," 2010). That same year, in an attempt to "test the accuracy of social media reporting," *Washington Post* sports columnist Mike Wise purposely tweeted false information about NFL quarterback Ben Roethlisberger. The tweet quickly circulated through the social media, and many reporters passed it on to audiences without bothering to verify it. The result was a major embarrassment for the *Post*, which suspended Wise for a month. In regard to his suspension, Wise tweeted: 'Probably not the best way to go about the experiment. But in the end, it proved two things: I was right about nobody checking facts or sourcing, and I'm an idiot. Apologies to all involved' (quoted in Benoit, 2010).

Sports reporters also had to learn to interact with fans and audiences, which was a significant change from the "we write, you read" dogma of traditional journalism (Deuze, 2003). In the Internet age, the sports media consumer is interested in taking part in the process, either by creating and distributing content or voicing an opinion to a larger audience. The number of people creating and distributing their own content, a concept widely known as citizen journalism, grew dramatically. Gillmor (2004: xv) called it:

... a global conversation that is growing in strength, complexity and power. When people can express themselves, they will. When they can do so with powerful, yet inexpensive tools, they take to the new-media realm quickly. When they can reach a potentially global audience, they can literally change the world.

In a sports context, dozens of independent companies emerged as distributors of audience content. Bleacher Report began in 2008 to provide a platform for bloggers and amateur sports writers to offer their news and opinions. By 2011, the company had 1,000 featured columnists, 7,000 contributors and had secured \$22 million in funding (Kelly, 2011). In the Washington, DC, area DigitalSports used parents, coaches, fans and even former journalists to shoot and post

content of sporting events. The site claimed more than a quarter million unique visitors in any given month, using what company executives called the "media entrepreneurial model," (Goldfarb, 2007: D1). Such companies obviously presented an enormous challenge to local television sports, which previously had exclusive distribution capabilities. As a result, many stations made a greater effort to include audience content on their sportscasts and websites.

Conclusions

According to Groothuis:

Major technological innovations don't just add something new to the environment, but change the whole environment. The printing press just didn't add more books. It transformed how people acquired knowledge, how they thought, and so on.

(in Kellner, 1997: 55)

It appears the emergence of the Internet, and specifically the social media, fundamentally transformed the local sports television industry and created a new environmental reality.

Local stations made halting efforts to address these new realities, but in many cases the speed and uncertainty of the transition made meaningful change difficult. Several stations seem to have reacted in a knee-jerk fashion by phasing out, reducing or eliminating their local sports presence. "Whether it's medical or education or crime or government or Michael Vick, all news has to earn its way into the newscast," said Shane Moreland of WTKR-TV in Hampton, Virginia, which dropped its local sports segment in 2007. "There's no longer going to be a segment where you just give someone three minutes" (Holtzclaw, 2007, para. 3). In 2011, the Poynter Institute observed that at a time when local television news was rebounding from several down years and more television journalists were being hired, "local TV sports time is shrinking" (Potter, 2011, para. 5).

Local stations concluded that "it's fruitless to try to compete with networks and Web sites that are devoted to sports all the time," said former journalist Malcolm Moran. Moran also predicted that stations around the country would drop sports news altogether by the year 2015 (Farhi, 2011, para. 7). To avoid that scenario, local television executives must come up with more imaginative solutions. The Internet could be a lifeline for a local television sports industry that appears to be slowly going under. However, the present course suggests that it may not be long before the Internet, Facebook and Twitter sink the industry for good.

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