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NEW MEDIA AND THE CHANGING ROLE OF SPORTS INFORMATION

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In 2010, sports information directors from around the United States and Canada gathered in San Francisco for the industry's annual convention. The organization had secured Ari Fleischer as its keynote speaker, an event that had been heavily promoted among the membership. Although Fleischer is best known for his political expertise, the former White House press secretary is the chief executive of a sports communication firm that consults athletes and coaches on crisis communication and media strategy. Following his speech, Fleischer participated on a panel related to strategic messaging at the conference, which provided just one of several opportunities for the attending sports information directors to learn about effective communication strategy. The keynote event that year and the related conference programming reflected what has become a pointed shift in the direction of sports information's organizing body, called College Sports Information Directors of America (CoSIDA) and its member SIDs. Once known as information specialists, SIDs face a changing set of responsibilities, many of which stem from changes in media technology (Stoldt and Humenik, 2008).

Front and center in this shift in responsibilities is a focus on strategic messaging; the profession is responding to new opportunities in which SIDs play a fundamental role in both selling the athletic brand to media — as well as fans. In doing so, SIDs have transitioned from solely assisting sports journalists to becoming a version of sports journalists themselves. Indeed, SIDs are at the forefront of a growing trend in which teams and leagues produce content that is intended to compete with traditional media outlets while also using such content strategically to enhance the athletic department's brand equity. A large part of the rise in league- and team-produced fan content is a function of changing media technology and its related low barriers to entry (Hutchins and Rowe, 2009). In light of these issues, this chapter reviews the role sports information directors play in the media production process, addresses the changes and challenges confronting those within it, and reviews questions for future research.

Introduction to the field

In general, sports information directors promote a university's sports teams to the media and community. They have traditionally occupied what the public relations industry often refers to

as a “technician” role, in which they complete such tasks as coordinating interviews, writing and distributing material to assist sports journalists (often called “game notes”), producing media guides, and promoting teams through the athletic department’s various media outlets. In addition, SIDs have traditionally been responsible for keeping and managing statistics, as well as completing other operational duties (Connors, 2007; Mullin, Hardy and Sutton, 2007; Stoldt, Miller and Comfort, 2001). SIDs are typically assigned to work with specific sports; those with higher profile teams often travel with those teams on the road and attend major events like conference championships. Within their office, SIDs are part of an internal hierarchy that includes the sports information director (often the head of the department), followed by associate, assistant and graduate assistant levels (Stoldt, 2000). Within the overall athletic department, SIDs have reported perceptions of low institutional value; their historical jobs as behind-the-scene technicians may be one reason the profession’s members have not garnered the respect of their colleagues, and have even “seen their influence diminish in the last 20 years” (Moore, 2012: 47).

A 2010 survey provides the most recent demographic data; consistent with the makeup of many sports-related professions, SIDs are overwhelmingly white and male (Whiteside and Hardin, 2010). Demographic data from that survey also showed that the majority (61 percent) had worked in sports information for fewer than 10 years; in general, the profession is comprised of relatively young professionals, and has a high turnover ratio, especially among women (Stoldt *et al.*, 2001; Whiteside and Hardin). According to Whiteside and Hardin, SIDs are most likely to be assigned to football, men’s basketball or women’s basketball, which reflects a wider trend of where athletic departments are currently prioritizing their resources (Clotfelter, 2011).

Strategic communication directors

In 2008 CoSIDA unveiled a strategic plan that highlighted a new vision for the organization. Front and center in the plan was an effort to showcase the critical function of strategic messaging, and the plan specifically urges its members to re-brand themselves as “communication directors” vs. “information directors” to reflect these new priorities (CoSIDA Strategic Plan, 2008: 15). Many individual offices have heeded this suggestion; although historically referred to as “sports information,” many have recently undergone name changes, now operating under the titles of “athletics media relations” or “athletics communications” offices. These changes, according to John Humenik, CoSIDA’s executive director, “project a person who has broader, more global duties and who is viewed more in a strategic and visionary capacity” (Stoldt, 2008: 460). The vision of a proactive, strategic role played by SIDs is also a response to perceptions that they lacked influence and prestige within the athletic department (Moore, 2012). Demonstrating their worth to an organization is one way in which such professionals may regain status and, under Humenik, it appears CoSIDA has made that a priority. Among the most visible changes was the launch of a new logo with a new tagline reading *Strategic Communication Directors* (Moore, 2012).

The change in strategic vision for the profession has developed in tandem with the rise of new media technology, and indeed, sports organizations regularly provide content across myriad social and multi-media platforms (Moore and Carlson, 2013.) The adoption of new media technology among SIDs has not been quick, however, and the profession has been “remarkably slow in embracing and accepting” new media platforms (Clavio, 2011: 309). Even for the most conservative of media strategists, it is hard to ignore the potential such technology offers to athletic departments as a venue through which to enhance the fan experience – and in turn

cultivate strong relationships between fans and the larger athletic brand. Perhaps nowhere are such opportunities more evident via an online presence than athletic department websites. What was once considered an “afterthought” has now become the most visible face of the athletic department (Smith, 2009a, para 4). As part of this shift, SIDs are now responsible for creating and maintaining an online space that fans seek out as a primary source of sports information that is simultaneously engaging and credible.

Producing their own web content is just one part of a fundamental shift in sports media generation and distribution processes, which has seen teams and leagues also launch their own networks, the Big Ten Network among the most successful (Weaver, 2011). In doing so, teams and leagues are now directly competing with traditional media outlets. Although such content often resembles that produced by sports journalists and broadcasters, the ultimate goals are more complex in that teams and leagues look to go beyond simply amassing an audience by also looking for ways to use their messages in ways that strengthen connections between that audience and the athletic brand.

Building a brand through online content

Although collegiate athletics are technically amateur, the industry itself is a lucrative one, and athletic departments are critically aware of the importance of building their respective brand equity – what Cunningham and Sagas (2002) define as fan awareness and perceived value in relation to the brand. Effective brand management is “vital” to collegiate athletic departments from a revenue point of view (Boyle and Magnusson, 2007); successful brand management has been shown to protect the brand against fan attrition during losing seasons (Gladden, Milne and Sutton, 1998) as well as negative associations during times of crisis (Dewar and Pillutla, 2000). Fans with a strong brand association also demonstrate stronger purchase intentions, a valuable component to an athletic department’s revenue stream (Cobb-Walgren, Ruble and Donthu, 1995).

Athletics websites represent an important venue for building the kind of valuable brand equity that is imperative in today’s saturated sports marketplace (Cooper and Pierce, 2011). The website management is often outsourced to companies like CBS College Sports, and such relationships have proven to be especially lucrative; the University of Nebraska, for instance, signed a 13-year, \$112.5 million contract in 2009 with website specialty company IMG College (Smith, 2009b).

Balancing credibility and organization goals

Although the websites are outsourced to various management companies, SIDs are largely responsible for providing the content (Cooper and Weight, 2011; Smith, 2009b). In doing so, SIDs must create content that will generate consistent page views, which requires them to go beyond simply re-posting press releases and overt marketing material and instead move toward generating content that competes with what is produced in traditional sports journalism venues (Cooper and Weight). That shift has begun to manifest, and “schools and conferences are starting to look at their sites as more entertainment-based ... They’re looking at how they keep the viewer there longer, in part, to satisfy advertisers. If you can do that, it can become very powerful” (Smith, 2009b, para 13).

Research has begun to address questions regarding website content from a business point of view. A study modeling audience behavior on collegiate athletics websites found that loyalty among fans on such sites follows a “sequential process”; more specifically, a “high quality sport

website increases fan satisfaction; likewise, heightened levels of satisfaction improve consumer loyalty to the website" (Hur, Ko and Valacich, 2011: 468). The formula for a 'high quality' website, however, is still unsettled. Among public relations scholars, effective website management includes four central tenets:

1. include useful information on the site;
2. frequently update sites and generate new content to engage publics and encourage return visits;
3. make the sites easy to use and navigate; and
4. strive to keep publics on the site.

(Briones, Kuch, Liu and Jin, 2011: 38)

Research evaluating organizational goals and strategy related to website content has pointed to the heavy emphasis of multi-media components on websites. In his survey of Division I athletic departments, Cooper (2010) found that participants rated video broadcasts as most critical in building an athletic department's brand image, followed by audio broadcasts and social networking links. A content analysis of 120 collegiate websites confirmed that video and audio are the most frequently used multi-media components available to fans (Moore and Carlson, 2013).

Regardless of message delivery platform, the overall website must still be deemed credible by fans as a legitimate sports news site. Along with avoiding an overt public relations and marketing feel, achieving credibility may stem from acknowledging so-called 'negative' news. Professional leagues provide one model; MLB.com famously conducted the first interview with Alex Rodriguez following his steroids scandal, posting the story on the front page of its website. Major League Baseball also aired the first interview with Mark McGwire following his admission to using steroids on its MLB Network (Garfield and Franklin, 2010). In an interview, Tim Franklin, Director of the National Sports Journalism Center at Indiana University, called the McGwire story a "watershed moment" in the evolution of sports media, adding that it symbolized "a paradigm shift from traditional legacy news organizations to new media."

When team- and league-produced website content is deemed credible by fans, it can effectively compete in even the most saturated media markets (Garfield and Hammond, 2009). In addition, such processes provide athletic institutions with the ability to control the message, something that is especially useful in an unflattering situation (Garfield and Franklin, 2010). Still, much more research is needed evaluating the practices of SID- and athletic-department-generated content in its effectiveness in both attracting viewership and meeting its goals in the brand management process.

New media technologies, old sport hierarchies

The relative new 'priority status' bestowed on collegiate athletic websites has raised questions related to how resources in the way of SID time and technical expertise are allocated and to what effect. Within each athletic department, a kind of hierarchy exists, in which certain sports are deemed more worthy, or valuable than others (Suggs, 2005). These hierarchies often pit men's and women's sports against each other, especially when it comes to the distribution of resources (Messner and Solomon, 2007). Scholars have lamented the growing trend by athletic departments in emphasizing profit maximization when making decisions, a practice that is especially pronounced at the Division I level (Cooper and Southall, 2010). For instance, in

using capitalistic incentives as a sole guiding compass, many athletic departments have sacrificed non-revenue-producing men's sports in favor of shifting more resources in to football. Advocates for non-revenue sports have raised concerns with this practice and urged athletic departments to re-imagine the priorities governing collegiate athletics (Clotfelter, 2011). Similar questions should be addressed in relation to the adoption and implementation of new media technology, and several scholars have begun exploring how the distribution of these resources may contribute to the maintenance of traditional sports hierarchies.

In general, content analyses of athletic department websites show that SIDs and others who exert control over the website direct much of their resources toward the sports with the highest return on investment, especially major men's sports (Cooper and Cooper, 2009). However, the disparities go beyond simple gender lines; in a 2011 content analysis of athletic department websites, the authors found that gender disparities in quantity of content were most pronounced at the Division I level; in contrast, websites at the Division III level, where the commercialization of sport is more muted, featured a more equitable distribution of content by team gender. The results "support the notion that Division I athletic departments focus on the mainstream media sports that offer the greatest potential for a strong return on investment" (Cooper and Pierce, 2011: 78). This assertion echoes a study by Cunningham and Sagas (2002), which found that athletic departments bestow equal amounts of resources online to women's basketball in comparison to men's teams only when the women's brand equity reflects that of men's teams (Cunningham and Sagas).

Along with women's sports, so-called "Olympic sports"—a moniker often given to all sports excluding football and basketball—may feel the brunt of the relationship between commercialization and new media technology. As athletic departments continue to funnel resources toward football and men's basketball, "it seems inevitable that nonrevenue teams will have to use the Internet effectively in future years to remain sustainable" (Cooper and Southall, 2010: 8). Yet, content analyses suggest that athletic department websites may not be serving Olympic sports in a way that sustains their respective fan base. In their work on collegiate wrestling, Cooper and Southall (2010) have urged coaches to bypass sports information and marketing offices in favor of creating the content themselves via social media.

Although institutional resources seem to be allocated based on a cost-benefit analysis only, SIDs themselves may not adhere to that logic; a survey of Division I SIDs showed that the majority believe too many resources are directed toward football, which may suggest that SIDs support a more equitable distribution of resources, including those related to new media (Whiteside, Hardin and Ash, 2011). It is unclear, however, how much influence SIDs have in the website content production process. Such individuals already work 70- to 80-hour work weeks and providing more content on, say, a men's tennis match may only happen if a particular SID creates such content after finishing his or her duties in relation to revenue producing sports. It is a tall order, and researchers should continue to address the types of resources allocated to websites, and their respective distribution.

Social media as a strategic tool

Shifts in SIDs' responsibilities have occurred in tandem with shifts in how sports fans access information on their favorite teams. Like many organizations looking to connect with various publics, athletic departments have begun experimenting with myriad social media platforms. Research suggests that embracing effective social media strategy will be critical for athletic departments interested in widening their fan base; for instance, an analysis of one large Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) school's fan base showed that fans in the 18- to 29-year-old age group

were more likely than any other age groups to regularly access team information via Facebook. Those in the 18- to 29-year-old age group and the 30- to 39-year-old age group were also more likely than any other age demographics to regularly access team information on Twitter (Clavio, 2011).

Engagement

Regardless of the communication platform, building connections with various audiences is a function of sound public relations practice; in general, public relations theorists argue that facilitating a two-way, or dialogic communication stream is imperative in building an effective relationship with a given public (Briones *et al.*, 2011). Communication strategists have pointed to social media as a useful platform in creating a space in which users feel like they belong and are some way connected to the organization/brand (Yan, 2011). In sports, creating a social identity with a team – defined as group affiliation – has been shown to result in higher perceived quality of the athletic program (Boyle and Magnusson, 2007). Social media is uniquely situated to enhance that feeling of belonging because of its interactive nature, and successful social media strategy is often described as one that encourages audience participation and dialogue (Yan, 2011). Indeed, the concept of “engagement” is central to effective social media implementation. For example, The Big Ten has made game footage available to fans, so they can edit and ultimately create their own mash-ups to share with other fans; this practice has positioned the Big Ten as a leader in creating a fan-centric experience (Steinbach, 2009, para 7). Ultimately, such tactics allow fans to talk and share information about the team with each other, something Yan (2011) argues is indicative of a successful exploitation of social media, a platform that is built to facilitate such multi-directional interaction. Other types of engagement range from asking for feedback, posting polls, responding to fan comments and providing unique and fresh content to reinforce connections with the team (Germann, 2010).

Making social media a visible part of the athletic department’s strategy may help those organizations better compete within the broader sports marketplace. A 2012 survey showed that sports fans are increasingly accessing sports information on their favorite teams via social media websites (Broughton, 2012). Fifty-eight percent of those surveyed said they used Facebook to discuss college football and 53 percent said they used the site to discuss college basketball. As a point of comparison, 71 percent of respondents said they used Facebook to discuss the NFL, followed by Major League Baseball (64 percent) and the NBA (62 percent). A higher percentage of college basketball fans said they had “liked” their team’s Facebook page (82 percent of college basketball fans) or “followed” their team’s Twitter feed (42 percent) compared to any other sport. Again, as a point of comparison, 78 percent of NFL fans had liked their team’s Facebook page and 22 percent had followed their team’s Twitter feed. The survey also showed that fans were most likely to engage in social media related to their team following wins, a finding that points to the importance of exploiting that desire to engage at strategic times (Broughton, 2012).

SIDs and social media

Athletic departments are using social media to varying degrees of success, at least in terms of fan engagement. In their content analysis of Big XII athletic program Facebook pages, for example, Wallace, Wilson and Miloch (2011) saw great disparities; at the time of their study, the University of Texas had 608,007 fans on Facebook, followed by the University of Oklahoma (257,748) and the University of Nebraska (162,591). This compared to the University of

Colorado, which had just 5,318 fans. The study also looked at the number of fans on NCAA-sponsored sport-specific pages and found wrestling had amassed more fans than any sport (128,243), including football (118,524). Consistent with existing trends on the allocation of resources around athletic department websites, research suggests SIDs may also be directing more attention to men's sports on social media sites; a content analysis of four athletic conference Twitter feeds showed that men received 66 percent of the links to video while just 12 percent of such links directed fans to women's sports content (Reichert-Smith, 2011). The analysis also showed that male athletes and teams garnered 70 percent of the overall tweets and that 50 percent of all tweets focused on football and men's basketball alone, leading the author to suggest that social media may be facilitating a "move toward further gender disparity" (p. 157). It will be important for researchers to continue to assess how the deployment of social media may stabilize – or challenge – existing sports hierarchies, either along gender lines, or those related to a sport's commercial potential.

Athletic departments are also experimenting with how to mobilize its resources around social media. The University of Washington was among the industry's early leaders, as it established a position in the sports information department specifically geared toward overseeing the athletic department's social media strategy in 2009 (Ramos, 2013). Washington's director of new media/recruiting has sought to expand the university's brand awareness through a variety of outlets, especially Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Tumblr and Instagram (Ramos). Conversely, the University of Oregon launched its "QuackCave" in 2012, which handed off some of the social media responsibilities to students. These efforts are part of the athletic department's strategic communication efforts, and will help the athletic department "monitor" what it calls "one of the top brands in college athletics" ("Ducks Launch," n.d., para 6). These two examples converge at the point of focusing on social media, but diverge in the management of those tools. As sports information offices continue to develop their social media presence, it will be important for researchers to assess the success of such efforts from various points of view. Wallace *et al.* (2011) provide a starting point; in their content analysis of Big XII and NCAA Facebook pages, the authors found that the most frequent type of status update were those that included links, which ultimately direct users away from Facebook and its interactive platform. In evaluating this practice, the authors concluded that the platform's tools were "underused" in terms of facilitating fan interactivity and suggest that future research explore fans' uses and gratifications when it comes to social media use. Future research may also want to evaluate how and why athletic departments are using certain social media sites. Pinterest, for instance, has a predominantly female fan base, something sports organizations have taken notice of, including the University of Washington athletic department and various collegiate women's basketball teams (Laird, 2012).

Changing media landscape

When the University of Arizona hired Rich Rodriguez to be its football coach, the news broke not through the *Arizona Republic* or one of Tucson's local media outlets, but via the athletic director's Twitter page. Although the deployment of effective communication strategy via social media and institutional websites may be a function of athletic departments' overall brand management goals, the byproduct has been a fundamental shift in the media production process. SIDs are still responsible for media relations duties, but they often do so now while simultaneously creating content that directly competes with those they are also helping.

A survey conducted by the Curley Center for Sports Journalism at Penn State in 2010 showed that SIDs are aware of their role in producing new forms of content (see Table 13.1).¹

Table 13.1 Percentage distribution of SID responses to new media related questions

	<i>Strongly disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly agree</i>
We use new media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and blog posts to communicate with the public regarding our teams	1.5	4.8	4.4	45.6	43.8
Social media allows the institution to better connect with media covering our teams	3.3	21.7	16.5	45.6	12.9
I effectively use the Internet and social media in my capacities as an SID	1.8	4.8	17.0	47.2	29.2
Reporters generally follow the storylines we push through our new media messages	1.8	4.8	16.9	47.1	29.0

Note: SID = sports information director

The vast majority reported using new media tools to connect with various publics, although a smaller percentage reported feeling comfortable with using the Internet and social media in their capacities as an SID. Not surprisingly, younger SIDs reported feeling more comfortable with such tools.² The findings were less overwhelming when SIDs were asked to evaluate the value of such content; a quarter disagreed or strongly disagreed that the deployment of such technology helps SIDs better connect with the media. These SIDs may be reacting to the changing media landscape in that the type of content sports information offices are providing is not always geared necessarily toward meeting media needs, but competing with those media. Still, more than three quarters of those surveyed felt that reporters generally follow the storylines their respective institutions push through their new media channels.

Perhaps the biggest advantage athletic departments hold in this regard is their access to “insider” content that is not readily accessible to traditional sports journalists. Even a casual glance at major athletic department websites reveals a bevy of “insider” content, ranging from videos featuring players on the bus, eating at training table or engaged in any number of light-hearted activities. Such content is not earth shattering, of course, but does help attract fans looking for information on their teams.

At the same time, when much off-the-field news breaks it is unclear what role SIDs play in this process. During the Duke Lacrosse scandal, for instance, university public relations officials handled the crisis communication duties, and the university established a website in which individuals could access pertinent information about the case (Fortunato, 2008). Similarly, little news about the Jerry Sandusky scandal at Penn State was posted on that institution’s athletic website during the events that unfolded in 2012. Scholars interested in the relationship between brand equity and team- and league-produced content should evaluate how athletic department media may shape perceptions of credibility among fans. On the other hand, the success of these emerging sports sources deserves critical reflection, as well. Team- and league-produced media provide fans with more options than ever before in terms of seeking out sports content on their favorite teams (Garfield and Franklin, 2010). However, if the goal is to use that content to facilitate fan connections to the brand, the blurring of public relations and entertainment ultimately leaves lingering questions about the social cost of such increase in content for fans. The Mark McGwire steroids story provides an example; although renowned sports journalist Bob Costas

conducted the famous interview which aired on MLB Networks, there was an unavoidable business interest at stake, which functioned as a constraint on the production of content (Garfield and Franklin, 2010). SIDs are thus at a similar critical intersection, and fans must ultimately be aware of how business interests and the focus on strategic messaging shape the final product.

Notes

1. Data collected from a 2010 phone survey of Division I FBS SIDs ($n = 272$). Respondents were chosen from a random sample of 450 SIDs, yielding a response rate of 60.4%. Respondents included SIDs at all levels, from graduate assistant to department heads and reflected the industry demographics reflected in earlier studies on sports information.
2. Younger SIDs reported a higher mean answer to the question "I effectively use the Internet and social media in my capacities as an SID" as indicated by a moderate, negative Spearman's Rank Order correlation, $r_s(261) = -.239, p < .01$.

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