

Tweet Talking: How Modern Technology and Social Media Are Changing Sports Communication

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Abstract

This study examined the role that modern technology and social media play in sports journalism, and how those roles will continue to affect the profession in the future. The history of modern sports (1920 – present) was analyzed, with special attention paid to the important technological advancements that pertained to sports in different eras. The study found that the basic structure of sports communication stayed intact until recent years, while the styles changed significantly. The past decade and a half can be viewed in sharp contrast to the preceding 75 years, as sports communication has been rapidly changing and will continue to do so due to technical innovations and the resulting interconnectedness of today’s society.

I. Introduction

The hour between 7 p.m. and 8 p.m. on Tuesday, October 5, 2010, will go down as a watershed moment in the field of sports journalism. Just four weeks into the National Football League’s 2010 season, fans of professional football around the country were buzzing over the possibility that the New England Patriots’ Randy Moss would be traded. The Hall of Fame–destined wide receiver was rumored to be heading to the Minnesota Vikings, the team that had drafted him out of college and with whom he became a star. Even the most casual sports fan’s mind was filled with questions: Is this for real? When is the trade going to happen? Why trade him? What would the deal look like? How will this affect my favorite team? Perhaps the most relevant question would have been: Where is this information coming from?

The story had not been reported in any newspapers or on television – even ESPN. Prominent sports websites like ESPN.com and FOXsports.com showed no stories on the subject either. Ordinarily, this story would have been major news. In the NFL, midseason trades are a rarity, not to mention those involving one of the most dynamic, productive, and polarizing players in league history. How did the general public catch wind of the news before the major outlets? As it turns out, a short phrase set off the frenzy: @sportsguy33: moss Vikings (Simmons 2).

Bill Simmons is a columnist for ESPN. The self-titled “Boston Sports Guy” gained notoriety for his passionate writing about his favorite teams: the New England Patriots, Boston Celtics, and Boston Red Sox. Simmons combines unparalleled knowledge of sports with unabashed fan bias and pop culture references to create a uniquely entertaining, widely read column that has gained him millions of fans. Aside from his column, he communicates with his readers via Twitter, a social networking website that allows users to “tweet” short messages, 140 characters or less including spaces, to their “followers” – users that essentially subscribe to receive another user’s messages.

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The service has many uses, from making social connections to reporting news and promoting businesses. Site members go by any name they wish, preceded by the “@” symbol; each message a user posts is preceded by their username and a colon. Simmons goes by @sportsGuy33; the phrase that set the Internet abuzz was one of his Twitter messages. While most users have a modest list of followers, Simmons boasts a flock of 1,277,316, all of whom received his message the instant he posted it (Simmons 2). Within moments the tweet spread, as Simmons’ followers shared his post with friends, speculated about the meaning behind it and most importantly, searched for more information on the subject. However, no other information was available; guesses and rumors remained just that, guesses and rumors. Then, an hour after Simmons’ original post, a story became available on most major sports networks confirming the possibility of a trade. The next afternoon the trade was finalized, sending Moss to the Vikings in exchange for a third round pick in the 2011 draft.

The event prompts several questions of importance for the future of sports journalism: How did millions of ordinary people know about interactions between two private organizations well before they were reported by mainstream news sources? What caused sports journalism to evolve to such a point? Was this an aberration, or can we expect more instances such as this? And if so, what does that mean for the further evolution of sports reporting? This paper will attempt to answer those questions by examining sports journalism both past and present, studying the technologies that have allowed the field to evolve to its current point, and projecting where it will be in the future.

II. History

Newspapers and Radio

The history of modern sports journalism mirrors that of sport itself. The beginning of sport’s ascension into the nation’s consciousness came during the 1920s, the so-called “Golden Age of Sport.” In the years following World War I and before the Great Depression, several developments fueled America’s hunger for sport. First, a booming post-war economy left Americans with money to spend; the rise of the automobile as a viable form of transportation to new ballparks and stadiums gave them methods of spending. However, sport’s popularity increased exponentially with the growing number of radio broadcasts. First introduced on April 11, 1921 with KDKA’s broadcast of a boxing match between Johnny Dundee and Johnny Ray, sports radio broadcasts gave people the opportunity to experience a live event without actually being there. Four months later, the first baseball game was broadcast live from Pittsburgh, with the first college football game following two months later (Patterson 12). As radio broadcasts became more popular, so did the sports they featured.

In particular, baseball flourished. The game became America’s national pastime in the 1920s thanks to three factors: radio broadcasts that increased its popularity, the emergence of Babe Ruth as a superstar and celebrity, and the end of the Dead Ball Era, which made the game more entertaining. Due to its popularity, baseball became the most-covered sport in the country.

Sportswriters in the 1920s wrote in a detailed, eloquent style that built athletes into folk heroes. Their stories often sought to tell a grander story than merely what had transpired on the field. Sports writing pioneers such as Grantland Rice excelled at capturing their readers’ attention and imagination with beautiful prose; Rice is perhaps best known for part of his poem “Alumnus Football,” which reads, “For when the One Great Scorer comes/ To write against your name/ He marks – not that you won or lost –/ But how you played the game” (Rice). Writers such as Rice were responsible for furthering the idea of sport as something more than competition; they instilled Americans with the idea that who won or lost was decided just as much by honor, courage, and sportsmanship than the score, which set the foundation for sports and athletes to grow to larger-than-life caricatures.

Magazines and Television

Through the 1930s, sports journalism remained relatively unchanged. Radio broadcasts continued to grow in popularity, and newspapers began hiring editors exclusively to handle the sports section. Throughout the Great Depression, radio broadcasts of sporting events provided cheap entertainment to Americans look-

ing for a distraction from their everyday lives.

However, at the end of the decade a new technology was introduced to the sporting world that would eventually change how sport and the stories that accompany it would be consumed. On May 17, 1939 the first television broadcast of an American sporting event aired, as a college baseball game between Columbia and Princeton was shown. While television would not become widespread until the 1950s, the introduction of the medium to sports gave the world a glimpse of what was in store for it in the future (Hocking 100).

Though technology was becoming more sophisticated and widespread as the years wore on, traditional print media was by no means dead. 1954 saw the birth of a publication that would help in the evolution of sports journalism as a unique, respected field: *Sports Illustrated*. Although the weekly magazine's parent company, Time-Life, was skeptical that the weekly periodical would succeed, within 20 years the company had accomplished its goal: "not to be a sports magazine, but to be *the* sports magazine" (MacCambridge 31). SI accomplished its goals by introducing several common elements of today's magazines, including in-depth reports, frequent color photographs, weekly illustrations, and sports card inserts, not to mention the annual Swimsuit Issue (Rushin 1). The magazine is generally credited as one of the major players in drawing American interest to the four main sports of football, baseball, basketball, and hockey; while it had originally featured a variety of sports including yachting, polo, and other more obscure sports, the magazine eventually restricted its focus to more mainstream sports, narrowing that of its readers with it.

By the late 1950s, television broadcasts of sporting events were commonplace. While radio broadcasts were still popular, television offered something that radio never could: visuals of what the announcer was describing. While most sports stories and scores were reported in newspapers and magazines, television was catching up quickly. One of the precursors to today's 24/7 sports channels was launched on April 29, 1961 – ABC's "Wide World of Sports," which was a weekly look at sports not often seen in America: surfing, badminton, rodeo and curling, among others. The show's introduction featured the now iconic line, "the thrill of victory, and the agony of defeat," accompanied by footage of ski jumper Vinko Bogataj's gruesomely botched jump. The show lasted 37 years, ending when longtime host Jim McKay declared it cancelled on January 3, 1998 (McKay 207). Part of the reason behind the show's cancellation was ABC's affiliation with a channel that had and would continue to change the world of sports journalism more than anything else: the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network, or ESPN.

Launched on September 7, 1979, ESPN featured its signature highlight and news show, *SportsCenter*, along with sports programs not usually picked up by network broadcasts. Early ESPN broadcasts consisted of boxing, wrestling, tennis, Canadian football and other sports. Beginning in 1982 with the National Basketball Association, ESPN began acquiring the rights to mainstream American professional sports. In the years since, the network has gained the rights to NFL games, college football, Major League Soccer, FIFA World Cup, MLB, college basketball, major tennis tournaments, golf and NASCAR, among others. When the network was first conceived, the thought of a 24-hour cable channel exclusively dedicated to sports was laughable. Today, it seems normal. In over 30 years of existence, ESPN broadcasts 65 sports over a variety of channels, 24 hours a day, in over 150 countries. In addition to its sports programming, the network breaks news on *SportsCenter* and ESPNNews, one of its sister channels. ESPN employs many of the top reporters for their respective sports. The network consistently breaks top stories more frequently than its competitors; with their unparalleled programming and top-notch reporting, there is no real argument when the network refers to itself as the "Worldwide Leader in Sports" (ESPN.com).

The Internet

While coverage of sports saw monumental changes throughout the 20th century, the biggest was to come during its last decade. The Internet became a viable source of information during the 1990s; ESPN launched its first website in 1995 as ESPNet.SportsZone.com, now simply ESPN.com. Websites run by sports networks featured the same information consumers could access through newspapers or television broadcasts; however, the World Wide Web created two important innovations for consumers: immediacy and content control.

Before the Internet, news broke on television first. An ESPN viewer interested in a particular story had to wait for *SportsCenter* to come on the air, then sit through portions of the broadcast unrelated to the news he perceived as interesting. The Internet eliminated the waiting game. Without the time restraints of television broadcasts, ESPN reporters could post their breaking news online as soon as the story was written. In addition to the timeliness factor, user control reached an all-time high. Instead of waiting through television

segments they were not interested in, users now had the ability to read only the stories they wanted. This was a first for sports news consumers: information on demand. Before the Internet, every other medium had been completely controlled by the media. Media members told the consumers what information they would receive, and when they would get it. The growth of the Internet as a news source helped to raise this me-first generation, which in turn has set the table for the media innovations we are experiencing today. For the first time, consumer demand is playing a prominent role in how news stories are broken as well as their content (Olney 1).

III. Implications

As media technology has evolved over the years, so has the way that information is gathered and published. In the past, newspapers and other print publications were the primary sources of news information; reporters had plenty of time to gather information and verify it through multiple sources before a story was published. Today that model of journalism is nearly obsolete. Now is the time of the rapid-fire news cycle; the rise of the Internet and round-the-clock cable news networks has in many cases channeled the energy of journalists toward pushing out news as fast as possible. With the demand for up-to-the-minute news and information increasing daily, reporters are under pressure to break news quickly or risk having their story published first by another media outlet. Often, this rush leaves reporters with an ethical dilemma: in the name of breaking news, should a story be published before it can be verified by multiple credible sources? Ethics is not a subject where people can take a wait-and-see approach; reporters have to know how they will act in these situations before they arise. “For choice implies a rational principle, and thought. The name, too, indicates that something is chosen *before* other things” (Aristotle 56).

Brian Formica is the sports anchor for WFMY News 2 in Greensboro, N.C. In January of this year, one of his sources informed him that David Cutcliffe, football coach at Duke University, was in Knoxville, T.N., interviewing for the University of Tennessee’s vacant head coaching position. Formica posted on his official blog, “Sources close to David Cutcliffe tell WFMY News 2 that the former Blue Devil coach is headed to Tennessee. WFMY News 2’s sister station WBIR in Knoxville, T.N., says sources close to the Tennessee side of negotiations say Cutcliffe has NOT taken the job” (Formica 2). Formica did not write anything beyond what he was told, nor did he say anything beyond the fact that Cutcliffe was in Tennessee, which he was. However, other media outlets began picking up Formica’s story and expanding on it. Within hours, major outlets like FOX Sports and ESPN were announcing that Cutcliffe was the new Tennessee football coach, citing Formica’s blog post. Said Formica, “Even though I had said nothing definite whatsoever, it ended up hurting my credibility because everyone else based their stories off of what I wrote” (Formica 1).

A similar issue arose from a March 15 article by ESPN the Magazine’s senior writer, Buster Olney. He reported that the Philadelphia Phillies had had internal discussions about trading Ryan Howard for the St. Louis Cardinals’ Albert Pujols. Wrote Olney, “It’s not fully clear whether the Phillies actually have approached the Cardinals with the idea, and even if St. Louis were to seriously consider such an offer, executives with the Cardinals would have to swallow very hard before dealing Pujols, a player widely regarded as the best in the sport” (Olney 2). The report brought contradictory claims from members of the Phillies. General Manager Ruben Amaro told Olney the rumors were “Lies. That’s a lie. I don’t know who you’re talking to, but that’s a lie” (Olney 2). Olney ultimately took a lot of heat for publishing his source’s information.

Unfortunately, stories like these will only become more prevalent as the demand for instant information becomes greater. Both cases feature stories published quickly, without multiple confirmations, and without identifying sources. While the stories themselves may have been permissible under those conditions, the fact remains that other organizations ran with those developing stories as fact, something the writers had a hand in. Formica and Olney were ultimately responsible for the information they published. Also, while they had the right to protect the identity of their sources except when subpoenaed by a judge (Pember & Calvert 363), the SPJ Code of Ethics urges journalists to identify sources whenever possible because “the public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources’ reliability” (Code of Ethics). Had the reporters revealed where their information came from, the stories might have been resolved quickly instead of growing into an ugly mess. Formica particularly failed to uphold another part of the Code: “Clarify and explain news coverage” (Code of Ethics). His initial report was oversimplified; this contributed to other media outlets’ willingness to report his story and expand on it. Still, this is what the world of journalism is turning into: The

demand for instant publication of news forces reporters to sometimes blur the line that divides what is ethical and what is not. In the past, reporters had time to analyze their stories and check sources. In *The Best American Sports Writing of the Century*, the writers speak of their subjects and sources as colleagues and friends, providing in-depth profiles that cannot be duplicated today (Halberstam xxi). The public constantly demands the next big story, forcing journalists to sometimes bend the rules to deliver.

Formica and Olney's approaches to this question have differed since their incidents. Formica has stated that he will never again post a news update without it first being confirmed by multiple sources – it just is not worth the risk, he says. "When the president of your company is on your doorstep yelling and dropping F-bombs because something you did started a media frenzy, that's when you stop" (Formica 1). Olney, on the other hand, will continue to publish stories he knows he can confirm if he absolutely must reveal his sources. "With the Philadelphia trade story, I never published anything that was not true. I later mentioned that to Ruben Amaro (GM for Philadelphia) and, off the record, he admitted to discussing the possibility of a trade" (Olney 1).

Just eleven months after the fact, Formica's statement and the logic behind it seem outdated. The sports media's integration of the latest technologies force it to evolve faster than ever before, and the process will only continue to accelerate. The latest medium to be embraced is the mobile web. Although it was once considered fantasy, millions of people today now have access to the Internet through their mobile phones wherever they go.

One of the biggest beneficiaries of mobile web service has been Twitter. With a mobile web connection, consumers as well as reporters can be plugged into the news machine constantly. The immediacy of Twitter was its greatest selling point; widespread mobile web access was the missing piece of the puzzle, allowing updates to truly occur in real time. Once dismissed as a simple toy for narcissists and attention whores to proclaim their current mood, location, thought or activity, the service has evolved into a forum filled with legitimate news sources.

Sports organizations and individual athletes now use Twitter to communicate directly with their fans. It allows consumers to receive up-to-the-second information – a reporter can tweet a short message about a story before it is even written, and follow up with the details later. Links can be posted to relevant articles, and pictures can be shared among followers as well. In this case, Twitter essentially gives its users the same information distributed by their favorite news sources, but in real time. While television and the Internet shrank the news cycle to 24 hours a day, seven days a week, Twitter has taken it to a new level. With news breaking almost as the events occur, the cycle has been reduced to 60/60: 60 seconds a minute, 60 minutes an hour.

While this is ideal for the ever-demanding consumer, news outlets are at odds with the same dilemma faced by Olney and Formica, only their problems are compounded by the intensity of the ever-shrinking news cycle. Reporters want to be the first to break a story, but the organizations they represent want all stories verified before they are published. The repercussions of losing a scoop or reporting false information are still the same; however, the decisions must be made faster than ever, putting an increasing amount of pressure on the journalists (Formica 1).

This can be illustrated more clearly with the case of Bill Simmons from the introduction. As it turns out, Simmons' tweet was an accident (Simmons 1). Having heard of the possibility of the Moss trade from a source, he attempted to find out more information before reporting the story, as per ESPN's breaking news policy.

According to Simmons, "We have a rule at ESPN that all breaking news must be filtered through our news desk (not tweeted)...Even if I wanted to tweet something like the Moss scoop, I couldn't do it without *flagrantly* violating company rules (Simmons 1)". He happened to be filming segments for an upcoming sports news show while receiving information on the trade via text message on his cell phone. Like Olney and Formica, he was under pressure to get his story out in a timely manner; except for Simmons in today's news environment, a "timely manner" meant "immediately," with no time to wait until his filming session was over. Simmons therefore attempted to send a private message to another source in order to confirm the story, became distracted while filming, and hit the wrong button on his phone: "send" instead of "cancel," accidentally tweeting "moss Vikings" to 1,277,315 more people than he had intended to. Luckily for Simmons the story turned out to be true, having been verified by other news sources nearly an hour after his original tweet (Simmons 1). Still, imagining similar scenarios occurring is not difficult. As the pressures of speed and accuracy increase and technology becomes more multifaceted, mistakes like Simmons' are inevitable, and some will face more serious consequences.

IV. Conclusions

The Twitter community went wild during the hour between Simmons' tweet and the story's confirmation from the rival news source. Simmons posted several tweets explaining his mistake, but offered no new information for his followers on the potential trade. Amid the speculation over the Moss-Minnesota trade, Simmons' mistake became just as big a story among his followers and fellow journalists, answering an important question: What happens in a rapid-fire news cycle when there is no news to report?

With such frequent access to their news sources, people will expect, even demand, a constant barrage of new information, whether it is newsworthy or not. This paves the way for stories based on gossip, speculation, and hearsay to receive as much time in the headlines, if not more, than deserving news items. At some point, filtering the real stories from the clutter might become as time-consuming for a consumer as waiting for *SportsCenter* to show the segment he's interested in viewing.

Another potential Twitter effect could be the mainstream media's sources scaling back their efforts to break news on the service. First might not necessarily be best; instead of racing to break a story, more traditional outlets could focus on being the first to post a thoughtful, detailed story that answers all of a potential reader's questions, rather than simply tweeting a variation of, "Event X occurred, details later." The communication industry is constantly changing and adaptation is key, but at some point enough will be enough.

Finally, in the world of sports, services like Twitter might be the beginning of the end for traditional journalism. At the core, a reporter is a voice that can be heard by a wide audience. In sports, he speaks for the players, coaches, owners and organizations; sports reporters tell us what those we can't communicate with think, feel, say and do. Twitter gives those players and other personnel direct channels to their audience; they can say what they want without fear of being misquoted or having their words taken out of context. Perhaps in the future, sports communication will be a direct, two-way street. After all, technology has to simplify things eventually. 140 characters sounds just right

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