Navigating the Digital Playing Field

Case Studies in Social Media and Sports Communication

by

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ABSTRACT

Sports communication is a vibrant, blossoming research area within the communication discipline. One of the more fruitful directions in sports communication research pertains to social media. Social media has embedded itself in the sports world in a very short period of time. As a result, there is a need for instructional resources that prepare students to understand the nuances and power that social media possess. This research provides the foundation for a case study textbook centered on social media and sports communication. Specifically, four cases dealing with: (a) athletes using social media to encourage input from fans; (b) sports organizations using social media as an agenda-setting tool; (c) negative parasocial interaction expressed to athletes via social media; and (d) athletes using social media to enact image repair are presented. These cases demonstrate that social media is a valuable conduit between athletes and fans that enables athletes and sports organizations to cultivate fan identity and maintain control over public information. The cases also demonstrate that fan behavior via social media can quickly turn problematic, requiring that athletes and sports organizations respond appropriately, yet strategically. The research concludes by offering implications for future social media and sports communication research.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Kirsten, Walker, and Connor, without whose love

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Sports communication is a vital research area within the communication

discipline and possesses strong interdisciplinary connections with fields such as

Sports Management, Sport Sociology, Sport Psychology, Sports Administration

and Management, and Mass Communication and Journalism. Yet, scholarly

resources for sports communication courses are relatively sparse. *Strategic Sport*

Communication, by Pedersen, Miloch, and Laucella (2007) places emphasis on

sports communication as a management tool (e.g., marketing, public relations).

Communication and Sport: Surveying the Field by Billings, Butterworth, and

Turman (2011) provides an excellent synthesis of sports communication research

and serves as a valuable introductory text to the sports communication field.

These texts are beneficial resources for introductory sports communication

courses, but a greater need exists. There is a lack of texts that focus on specific

sports communication topics that appeal to both academic and practitioner

audiences. Brown and O'Rourke (2003) offered one such work, *Case Studies in*

Sports Communication, but it has been nearly a decade since that edited volume

was published. In the ensuing years, a number of important changes in sports have

occurred – most notably with the advent of communication technology and social

media. Social media has transformed sports (Sanderson, 2011; Sanderson &

Kassing, 2011), yet texts focusing on this phenomenon are virtually non-existent.

Accordingly it is imperative that scholars, students, and practitioners in sports

communication and related fields attend to social media issues in sports. This

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research provides one such resource. In providing a series of case studies centering on social media and sports communication, this dissertation creates the foundation for a text that will be applicable to those in the classroom and the "field."

Sports Communication

Although established scholars such as Nick Trujillo, Bob Krizek, and Lawrence Wenner have been doing exemplary work in sports communication for years, in the past decade this area has become more prominent in scholarly circles (although barriers still remain). A key event in sport communication's evolution occurred in 2002 when several influential scholars who were interested in advancing sport communication in the discipline, met at Arizona State University West. One important outcome stemming this assemblage was a *Communication Yearbook* piece entitled, "Communication in the Community of Sport: The Process of Enacting, (Re)Producing, Consuming, and Organizing Sport" (Kassing et al., 2004). This seminal piece argued for sport's inclusion in the communication studies field and outlined directions for future work.

Since this article was published, several important events have occurred, a testament to the work of these scholars. First, the initial 2002 meeting spawned the formation of the Communication and Sports Summit. The Summit was initially held every two years and brings together researchers studying various aspects of sports communication. With each Summit, participation has dramatically increased, and at the 2008 Summit at Clemson University, it was announced that top papers would be published in a special issue of the *Journal of*

Communication Studies. In 2012, the popularity of the Summit led to the organization's formal launch as a non-profit organization re-named the International Association for Communication and Sport. Additionally, the Summit is now held annually and the association now sponsors a journal devoted to sports communication research - *Communication and Sport*.

Second, communication journals have devoted several special issues to sports research. This included a special issue of the *Western Journal of Communication* (2008), entitled "Communication and the Community of Sport," and a special issue of the *Electronic Journal of Communication* (2009), entitled "New Directions in Communication and Sport." In addition to these special issues, work on sports communication has appeared in outlets such as the *Journal of Communication*, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, Southern Communication Journal*, *Communication Quarterly*, *Communication Studies*, *and Western Journal of Communication*. Third, in 2008, Human Kinetics commenced the *International Journal of Sport Communication*, the first peer-reviewed academic journal entirely dedicated to sports communication research. This journal provides a friendly outlet for sports communication scholars and is a flagship for sports communication research. Additionally, edited handbooks on sports communication and sports communication and new media are currently in preparation.

Scholars in sports communication study a variety of interesting phenomena. Fascinating research is being done in areas such as sports media, identity, coach-athlete communication, and more recently, communication

technology. *Communication and Sport: Surveying the Field (*Billings, Butterworth, & Turman, 2011) is the first text to synthesize this research for incorporation into sports communication courses. This work does a tremendous job of providing students with an overview of the sports communication field. Yet, sports communication continues to gain traction and additional instructional resources are needed. Such works will complement generalist texts while providing specialized attention to contemporary issues in the sports communication field. The advent of communication technology; and more specifically, social media, has introduced a number of compelling changes in the sports world, creating a host of issues that have quickly emerged. Accordingly, a text devoted to social media issues in sports that facilitates problem-solving and application skills is warranted.

Social Media and Sports Communication

It is difficult to peruse sports headlines without reading about a social media "incident." As evidence, some brief examples are offered. On April 25, 2011, American tennis player Donald Young publicly apologized for a profanity-laced tirade he posted on Twitter the previous week. After Young lost a match that would have secured a wild-card entry into the French Open tennis event, he turned to Twitter to criticize the United States Tennis Association (USTA) (Associated Press, 2011). Naturally, his tweet became a major news story, prompting the apology. In May, 2010, National Football League (NFL) player Darnell Dockett issued a public apology after he posted a tweet that linked readers to Ustream, a video file-sharing site, where they could watch a video of him

taking a shower (Azcentral.com, 2010). In March, 2011, Women's National

Basketball Association (WNBA) player Cappie Pondexter, apologized after she

tweeted the following statement in response to earthquakes that had devastated

Japan earlier that month: "What if God was tired of the way they treated their own

people in their own country! Idk guys he makes no mistakes" (Littmann, 2011).

These examples represent only a tiny fraction of the public relations

incidents that have been triggered by athletes' tweets, Facebook postings, or blog

entries. This issue is further compounded by sports organizations lack of control

over social media. Messages can be transmitted from mobile devices virtually

anywhere in the world, and thus, controversies are only one tweet or status update

away.

Social media also enhances fans' ability to communicate and interact with

athletes and sports figures. Social media provides fans with a mechanism to be

actively involved in athletes' media narratives (Dal Cin, Zanna, & Fong, 2004;

Green & Brock, 2000) as they combat the athlete's detractors and promote

preferred identities of the athlete (Sanderson, 2010b). Social media further

enables fans to actively promote social identity and criticize those whom they

perceive to be threatening their social identity. In March, 2011, the National

Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) announced that they were investigating

Ohio State University head football coach Jim Tressel. This investigation

stemmed from allegations that Tressel had knowingly lied to the NCAA about his

knowledge of Ohio State football players violating NCAA rules. As Tressel came

under attack, fans flocked to the Ohio State football Facebook page to adamantly

support Tressel and defend the integrity of Ohio State Football – a visible component of their social identity. This advocacy continued even after Tressel was ultimately fired by Ohio State.

Social media is a fertile field for sports communication researchers. Encapsulating social media events into case studies will encourage students and practitioners to engage with these issues and ponder the "lessons" that can be learned from these events while fostering creative applications for the future. Although there is exciting work being done in this area, there remains more to do. This research contributes to the sports communication field by providing the groundwork for a case study text addressing one of the most compelling contemporary issues in sports in a manner that appeals to scholars, students, practitioners, and fans alike.

Case studies have significant pedagogical value. Case studies help students merge theory and application and brainstorm to identify practical, realistic solutions to problems (Quarstein & Peterson, 2001). Accordingly, case studies provide a valuable resource to stimulate class discussion and engage students in relevant issues that promote innovative thinking and problem-solving skills.

Case Studies as Pedagogical Tools

Case studies are "promising pedagogical responses" (Sudzina, 1997, p. 200) that help students understand how theoretical constructs manifest in society. Case studies are realistic, have impact, and generate discussion (Fisch, 1997). For pedagogical purposes, a case study is conceptualized as a "realistic multilayered

teaching dilemma that can be viewed from a variety of perspectives" (Sudzina, 1997, p. 204). Case studies have been used extensively in management schools and are valuable pedagogical aids in sports management and related fields (Sanchis, 2007).

Case studies offer several pedagogical advantages. First, case studies open up divergent avenues for student exploration (Misco, 2009). Whereas in a lecture students are less inclined to emotionally invest in further inquiry of subject and content areas, case studies allow students to engage with course materials by encouraging deep investigation. Thus, students are able to explore a subject or content area in extensive detail, which drives and promotes additional inquiry. Second, case studies enable students to visibly identify trends and implications for subject matter (Ertmer & Stepich, 2002). With case studies, students identify key concepts that may be lost in translation through general course lecture. Moreover, by using discussion questions, case studies prompt students to think about how subject matter may occur in other contexts. For example, a case study investigating social support offerings to sports figures via Facebook helps students identify and understand social support types (e.g., emotional support, network support) as well as how athletes can use social media to induce social support. Thus, when a student sees athletes, politicians, or other celebrities utilizing social media sites, he/she will recognize the strategies at work, allowing her/him to interpret social behavior.

Third, case studies enable educators to meet curricular requirements through investigation of relevant material (Misco, 2009). Most educational

courses have a series of objectives or competencies that must be achieved, and case studies are an optimal way for these goals to be realized. For instance, if students in a persuasion class are expected to be identify persuasive appeals (e.g., foot-in-the-door); a case study employing marketing campaigns or health campaigns could be employed to meet these objectives. Fourth, case studies are conducive to multiple interpretations through teacher-student dialogue and student-student exchanges (Misco, 2009). As students encounter a range of ideas and responses, they are required to adjust their thinking to counter or support arguments - fostering and encouraging inquiry. Such conversations keep students engaged and strengthen understanding of subject matter. Fifth, case studies offer students the ability to perform relevant-tasks within specific content areas which serves as a comprehension measure (Sudzina, 1997). Said differently, as an assessment tool, after discussion and interaction, students are presented with a case that allows instructors to measure understanding of course concepts based on identification and recognition of subject matter.

Effective case studies deal with relevant ideas that are garnering significant attention in a particular subject area (Wassermann, 1994). Wassermann (1994) argued that successful case studies are determined by: (a) clarity in presenting issues; (b) the ability to generate student interest; and (c) the instructor's capability to facilitate and guide class discussion. Case studies require instructors to depart from lecture-based pedagogical models by prompting students to derive their own conclusions and answers. Instructors must be patient with case studies and recognize that outcomes are less predictable. However,

instructors who exercise requisite patience are rewarded with rich, interactive exchanges (Levin, 1995; Lundeberg & Fawver, 1994; Wassermann, 1994), although instructors must possess strong content area knowledge and subject matter teaching (Shulman, 1987; Brophy, 1992).

This research promotes effective case studies by attending to the following issues: (a) incorporating relevant issues involving social media and sports communication; (b) identifying key concepts and theories and then linking these items to the case; (c) having a heavy research emphasis; (d) offering discussion questions to assess understanding; and (d) providing application activities that instructors can incorporate into class assignments.

Case Study Format

The case studies will be formatted as follows:

Introduction to the case. This includes a description of the incident that the case is built around and a brief summary of the case's utility for sports communication.

Literature review. Literature relevant to the case under review is summarized.

Method. Data for the cases will come from the following sources: (a) athletes Facebook pages; (b) fan Facebook pages; (c) sports organization Facebook pages; (d) athletes Twitter profiles; (e) fan Twitter profiles; (f) sports organization Twitter profiles; and (g) electronic discussion forums on prominent sports media sites (e.g., ESPN.com).

Data analysis consists of qualitative, interpretive, methods. Given the large amounts of data on these sites, systematic random sampling techniques (e.g., every 5th tweet, every 10th Facebook post) will be adopted while preserving sufficient sample sizes. Past research of this nature has contained between 300 – 1300 messages, and it is anticipated that data for the cases will fall within these parameters. Each posting or tweet will serve as the unit of analysis. Data analysis will also involve thematic analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data will be micro-analyzed and classified into emergent categories. After the initial categorization of data, I will return to the data to determine the utility of the developed categories (Suter, Bergen, Daas, & Durham, 2006).

Themes are summarized and compared to ascertain similarity, and I compare and reduce themes as much as possible while still preserving meaning. Through this process, development, clarification, and enhancement of categories occurs until new observations fail to add significantly to existing categories. Additionally, as the data analysis is interpretive in nature, overlap between categories exists and I allow for the chance that several themes are evident in a single posting or tweet.

Discussion/Conclusion. Implications from the case are covered, including, but not limited to, implications for sports communication, sports organizations, practitioners, and discussions of future trends for the topics covered in the case.

Discussion Questions. A list of questions is provided to facilitate classroom discussion. Instructors have the option of assigning these questions as assignments, or offering them as a discussion board assignment.

Activities. A series of activities will be included that instructors can use to further engage students with the material presented in the case. These tasks may be research based (e.g., find 5 social media policies from Division I Athletic Departments, summarize these policies, then create your own policy) or more project-based (e.g., create a training program that will help athletes use social media strategically).

Case Study Overview

Admittedly, there are more cases available for study than can be incorporated into this research. Case studies are thematically organized according to key themes in the literature on social media and sports (Sanderson, 2011; Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). The following section outlines the major themes in each of these areas before providing a brief description of the four case studies that comprise the dissertation.

Media Implications

Breaking News. Athletes and sports figures are increasingly using social media to break news, thereby circumventing sports reporters. This enables fans to obtain news directly from the "source" and lessens their reliance on sports journalists to obtain breaking news. Consequently, many sports reporters now follow athletes and sports figures on social media channels, to remain competitive. For instance, in May, 2011, University of Arizona men's head

basketball coach Sean Miller was being courted by the University of Maryland. Arizona Athletic Director Greg Byrne kept fans informed via Twitter of the university's efforts to keep Miller, and Miller's son, also tweeted that Miller was staying at Arizona. Miller ultimately ended up signing a contract extension and staying at the University of Arizona, but Twitter allowed fans to keep tabs on the process as it was unfolding.

Agenda-Setting. Agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) suggests that the mass media does not tell audience members what to think, but does influence what they think about. With the advent of social media, athletes and sports organizations now have a media channel to perform agenda-setting. Social media offers audience members with additional sports consumption venues by which they can be influenced. For example, former Major League Baseball (MLB) player Roger Clemens is under federal investigation for lying to Congress about using performance-enhancing drugs during his career. Clemens has been excoriated by sports journalists for his perceived dishonesty. Clemens has maintained his innocence and has employed Twitter to promote his innocence to fans and obtain their support.

Countering Media Framing and Perceived Media Inaccuracies. Athletes are frequently subjected to "framing" from sports journalists. In other words, their actions and comments are packaged in news stories in ways that shape audience members' interpretation. In the past, athletes who felt they were inaccurately portrayed in the media could perhaps share these feelings with sympathetic reporters or team personnel; yet, these efforts had limited scope.

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With social media, however, athletes now have access to wide audiences that allow them to counter perceived negative representations by sports reporters. For instance, Mean, Kassing, and Sanderson (2010) investigated how disgraced American cyclist Floyd Landis used his blog to counterframe prevailing narratives about his alleged performance enhancing drug use. Social media also enables athletes to directly confront offending sports journalists. In May, 2011, New Orleans Saints running back Reggie Bush sent a tweet which insinuated that he was happy about the NFL players being locked out because he could forego working out and "slaving" in hot weather. Bush came under intense media scrutiny for his comments, and ESPN commentator Skip Bayless was particularly scathing. Bush and Bayless then attacked one another – via Twitter. Their Twitter confrontation gave Bush a unique avenue to challenge Bayless while simultaneously allowing fans to publicly witness and weigh in on their debate.

Optimizing Self-Presentation. Social media affords people more selectivity in their self-presentation (Pena, Walther, & Hancock, 2007; Walther, 1996). This capability extends to athletes and also enables them to obtain feedback that can be used to evaluate public support for their self-presentation. For example, a number of athletes have turned to social media to repair public images that have sustained damage (e.g., Michael Vick, Tiger Woods). Social media is a cost-effective resource that connects athletes to a multitude of fans, and as such, is a valuable public relations tool.

These themes are distinct yet concurrent. That is, an athlete may use social media to project a preferred identity, yet this same strategy can simultaneously

combat perceived media inaccuracies. Similarly, an athlete may report his/her new playing destination via Twitter, or share news relating to his/her sport that is supplemented with commentary to guide fans interpretations. Thus, social media is more than just a connective tool, it certainly promotes and fosters interactions, but it is much more than that – a powerful media channel that can be persuasively and strategically employed. Accordingly, sports organizations now have a vested interest in harnessing social media's power.

Organizational Implications

Releasing Information Prematurely. Whereas athletes have always had ways to release sensitive information, these opportunities have exponentially increased with social media. Athletes (and team employees) can release information from essentially any location and sports organizations may be unaware that information has been disclosed until they are bombarded by sports reporters looking for commentary. On June 16, 2009, NBA player Kevin Love disclosed via Twitter that head coach Kevin McHale had been fired by the organization, "Today is a sad day…Kevin McHale will NOT be back as head coach this season." Once this disclosure went public, mass media organizations quickly interrogated the Timberwolves, as McHale's departure had not been formally announced. While the Timberwolves initially declined to confirm McHale's dismissal - that was the eventual outcome. Love clearly had insider information about McHale's situation which he then broadcast, catching the Timberwolves off guard.

Making the Private Public. Social media has increased the ability for people to make private information public, and this trend has filtered into the sports world as well. Via social media, athletes broadcast information that is unlikely to be released publicly by sports organizations. In some instances, this information sharing increases connections with fans (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010a), yet in other situations, becomes problematic. For example, during the 2009 football season, Texas Tech university football players began tweeting that head coach Mike Leach was absent and tardy for team meetings. Leach promptly banned his players from using social media. As many student-athletes have cellular phones that can be easily used to disseminate information, fans gain access to as news is directly obtained via their social media profile. Many sports organizations have responded to this outcome by restricting specific types of content from being posted on social media, yet these policies have not significantly curbed this trend.

Self-Disclosure/Public Relations Issues. Athletes have created a number of controversies through their social media postings. These actions place sports organizations in a precarious position of responding to unplanned public relations dilemmas. In May, 2011, Pittsburgh Steelers running back Rashard Mendenhall came under considerable criticism after he posted several tweets that appeared to be admonishing people for celebrating the death of Osama bin Laden. The Steelers quickly issued a statement that they had no idea why Mendenhall had made these comments, but this story garnered national news attention and fans flocked to the Steelers Facebook page to passionately censure Mendenhall.

Dissent. Social media provides athletes and sports figures with viable avenues to express dissent, or contradictory feelings about workplace policies and practices (Kassing, 1997). Via social media, these claims are bolstered to cultivate dissent amongst fans (Sanderson, 2009a). Sports organizations must now grapple with social media as a dissent mechanism and are imposing severe consequences for such behavior. For instance, in April, 2011, Chicago White Sox manager Ozzie Guillen was ejected from a game, and used Twitter to express his frustration with the umpiring. Major League Baseball Commissioner Bud Selig promptly suspended Guillen for two games.

Promotion. Although sports organizations must be concerned with athletes' and team employees' social media disclosures, they are increasingly using social media to promote the organization by fostering fan participation. Indeed, social media has become an essential marketing tool for sports organizations. For example, in May, 2011, the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) organization announced that it would begin paying fighters bonuses tied to their Twitter use. All fighters have been divided into four categories, and at the end of each quarter, a $5,000 bonus is paid to the fighter in each category who: (a) has the most followers; (b) gained the highest percentage of new followers from the previous quarter; and (c) who wrote the most creative tweets (Mrosko, 2011). Encouraging fighters to engage fans via Twitter is a creative way to build the UFC brand.

Athlete-Fan Communication Implications

  Enhanced Identification. Social media offers fans additional domains to publicly display their identification with athletes and sports teams. Social identity theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) is an optimal lens to understand why fans engage in this behavior. SIT contends that individuals have both a personal and a social identity and suggests that social identity is comprised of characteristics derived from demographic classifications or organizational membership (Turner, 1982). SIT further posits that people satisfy their self-esteem needs through group membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Once group membership is procured, people bolster self-esteem by forming favorable attitudes about their groups while positioning competing groups as less valuable (Turner, 1975). While identification has been and continues to be expressed in many ways (e.g., face painting at sporting event), social media provides a convenient outlet for fans to express identity directly to athletes and other fans, particularly when athletes engage in behavior that fans perceive to harm their social identity.

  Enhanced Parasocial Interaction. Parasocial interaction (PSI) describes how media users relate to and develop relationships with media figures (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Social media has dramatically increased parasocial interaction opportunities for fans as they can directly express PSI to athletes and sports figures (Kassing & Sanderson, 2009a; Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). Social media further enables fans to involve themselves in athletes' media narratives and enact diverse behaviors ranging from admiration and support to criticism and censure. Although fans have always expressed dismay with athletes, social media provides

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fans with a conduit to voice these sentiments directly to athletes. In some cases, athletes also respond directly, creating a unique avenue for interaction.

Social Support. Social media is a valuable way for athletes to facilitate social support from fans – both solicited and unsolicited. One of the more compelling uses of social media in this regard occurred with professional golfer John Daly. In March, 2010, Daly asked his Twitter followers to harass sports journalist Gary Smits after Smits wrote an article disclosing disciplinary issues from Daly's PGA Tour file. Daly tweeted, "here's the JERK who writes NON-NEWS article on debut of my show – CALL & FLOOD his line and let's tell him how WE feel." The calls to Smits started around midnight – minutes after Daly sent the tweet (Gola, 2010, p. 73). Although most callers hung up, Smits reported that approximately 25% of callers left messages, some of which were quite abusive. Social media allowed Daly to quickly rally support from fans and considering that his issue was with a reporter, had he voiced this information via the press, it is doubtful that fans would have obtained the necessary information (Smits' phone number) to act on Daly's behalf. While it is unclear how many of the callers were following Daly on Twitter, it is noteworthy that calls begin pouring into Smits' office moments after Daly broadcast this request.

Audience Labor/Surveillance. Social media allows fans to monitor athletes and sports figures and report their actions to sports organizations. In this respect, sports organizations increase surveillance without having to pay for this service. For example, Sanderson (2009b) explored how fans used various social media outlets to perform audience labor that alerted sports organizations to the

private conduct of three professional athletes (NBA players Josh Howard and

Greg Oden, and NFL player Matt Leinart). Interestingly, all three incidents took

place on the athletes' personal time, one of which occurred at their private

residence (Leinart). As a result, these athletes were censured by the organization,

an action that fans overwhelmingly approved. With advances in technology

(miniscule cellular phones with photographic capabilities) athletes' private

behavior is much more likely to be captured and disseminated.

As social media trends continue to emerge, it is imperative that sports

communication researchers investigate these patterns and stay on the forefront of

the social media frontier. Case studies are one avenue to capture these trends and

prepare students to handle social media issues in the sports industry. This research

now moves into four cases that examine some of the aforementioned social media

trends.

The first case involves Phoenix Suns player Steve Nash soliciting input

from fans as the team was approaching the end of a disappointing season. Via his

Facebook page, Nash invited Suns fans to offer input on how the team could

improve for the following season. As this gesture was made via social media, fans

had a convenient way to respond to Nash, and this advice-seeking promoted

parasocial interaction from fans, who felt as if Nash *needed* their input.

The second case centers on the National Football Players Association's

(NFLPA) use of Twitter as an agenda-setting mechanism during a labor lockout

that followed the 2010-11 regular season. During labor disputes, deploying

favorable messages is paramount and in the past, mass media has been the

primary conduit to influence the public. The NFLPA, however, embraced Twitter and provided fans with a steady stream of information that was augmented by video, photographs, and player interaction, moves that promoted intimacy and subsequently support. Social media channels such as Twitter enable organizations to promote their agendas by optimizing self-presentation and engaging audiences, outcomes that are difficult to achieve using traditional mass media channels.

The third case examines negative parasocial interaction between Cleveland Cavalier fans towards LeBron James after he voluntarily left the team as a free agent to join the Miami Heat. Social media has made it easier for fans to contact athletes, and many messages are hateful and inflammatory, and this was certainly the situation with this case. Parasocial interaction does elicit positive outcomes, but the ease and convenience that social media affords fans can be used to immediately dispense vitriolic commentary. This trend bears watching as athletes are reciprocating when fans attack them via social media which leads to further condemnation for the athlete and a public relations issue for the sports organization.

The final case involves professional golfer Tiger Woods' employing Twitter to perform image repair. The ability to optimize self-presentation and engage fans are integral for athletes who are seeking to repair their image. Woods arguably experienced the most significant fall from grace in recent sports history, yet via Twitter, he resuscitated his image by displaying identities that the public rarely saw through mass media. For athletes who engage in image repair, social media allows them to construct and disseminate preferred images *and* to gauge

public feedback through commentary. This information is crucial as athletes can then adapt image repair strategies to increase fan support. It is no wonder that athletes who find their image damaged are incorporating social media to restore their reputation.

Chapter 2

ATHLETES SOLICITING INPUT: THE CASE OF STEVE NASH AND

FACEBOOK

The 2010-11 National Basketball Association (NBA) season did not live

up to expectations for the Phoenix Suns. The Suns had reached the Western

Conference Finals the previous season and 2010-11 was full of promise.

However, the Suns failed to replicate their success from the previous year, and as

the end of the season loomed, it became evident that the Suns would not qualify

for the post-season playoffs. This dramatic decrease in performance caused

considerable angst amongst Suns fans, and the players were clearly disappointed

as well. When sports teams fail to meet expectations, it is quite common for fans

and sports journalists to hypothesize about the attributing reasons for under-

performance and suggest remedies that can be adopted to ensure the following

season is more successful.

Such discussions have primarily been held in venues such as sports talk-

radio, newspaper columns, blogs and fan related internet sites. However, on

March 31, 2011, Steve Nash, the Suns most prominent player provided fans with

an opportunity to offer their feedback on how the Suns could improve for the

2011-12 NBA season. Nash posted the following comment on his Facebook page,

"Man, this has been a really disappointing season. What do you think the Suns

need to do for next year?"

This move by Nash is symptomatic of a predominant trend in athlete-fan

communication occurring via social media channels – athletes soliciting fans for

input and advice (Sanderson, 2011). Fans certainly are not shy about sharing their

opinions on sports, but these suggestions have traditionally been voiced in

platforms such as sport talk-radio and letters written to editors of the sports

section of the newspaper - rarely are they communicated directly to athletes.

Athletes are capitalizing on social media's accessibility to regularly invite fans to

provide commentary and input on a variety of issues – both on and away from the

playing surface.

This trend holds important implications for sports communication.

Kassing and Sanderson (2010a) observed that social media is shifting interaction

between fans and athletes to less parasocial and more social in nature. Social

media affords more two-way interaction opportunities and in some instances, has

resulted in fans actually meeting athletes and forming social relationships with

them. Such outcomes would be highly unlikely without the connection provided

by social media. Indeed, while fans can write letters to athletes or hope to have

chance encounters with them, social media offers a higher probability to actually

converse with athletes, as fans are provided with a direct and immediate link to

them. This interaction also promotes closeness and identification with athletes and

may strengthen fans' loyalty and connection with sports teams and athletes. That

is, when an athlete extends an invitation for fan commentary, a fan responds and

is recognized by the athlete (e.g., direct comment or re-tweet) fan identity is

bolstered leading to other behavior such as increased purchasing activity.

This case explores how fans responded to Nash's request for input on how

the Suns could improve. Social media solicitations are becoming more frequent

and demonstrate how social media technologies have opened unprecedented avenues for fans to access athletes (Sanderson, 2011; Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). As such, it is important to understand the ways that fans respond. Sports teams and athletes can utilize social media to cultivate fan followings and increase fans' perceptions of participation and involvement with the team. Social media also can be used to quickly mobilize fans to take action on behalf of athletes and sports teams (Sanderson, 2010a) and these technologies may prove useful when athletes are confronted with challenging situations.

Taking tangible action on behalf of an athlete and sports organization is likely to occur if fans have been cultivated to believe that their commentary and opinions are valued. That is, an athlete who routinely seeks input from fans and reinforces this participation may subsequently obtain high response when making requests for assistance as fans are conditioned to perceive that their voice matters to the athlete. Social media has provided a valuable tool for athletes and sports organizations to employ when seeking information from fans. Yet, there are several constructs at work that account for the high participation that occurs when such requests are made. Several of these concepts are now reviewed.

<div align="center">**Literature Review**</div>

Parasocial Interaction

Parasocial interaction (PSI) describes how media users relate to and develop relationships with media figures (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Research suggests that PSI mirrors actual social relationships and that media users evaluate media figures in the same way they evaluate actual social partners (Giles, 2002).

For instance, Rubin and McHugh (1987) found that social attraction to a media figure was a stronger predictor of PSI than physical attraction, and Cohen (2004) and Tsao (1996) argued that parasocial and actual social relationships required equivalent skill sets. Early PSI research focused on traditional mass media channels as scholars explored PSI with television newscasters (Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rayburn, 1980; Rubin & McHugh, 1987, Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985); soap-opera characters (Perse & Rubin, 1989; Rubin & Perse, 1987); and radio and television talk-show hosts (Rubin, 2000; Rubin, Haridakis, & Eyal, 2003). While traditional media has laid the foundation for PSI research, with the advent of social media, audience members have convenient tools to more overtly express PSI.

One way this has occurred is through a shift in PSI as fans offer advice to athletes rather than seeking it from them. Kassing and Sanderson (2009b) explored PSI occurring on cyclist Floyd Landis's blog and discovered that fans dispensed diverse counsel related to both cycling and social activities. For example, "Get some rest tomorrow and get those legs ready for Saturday!" "Tell those mechanics to CHECK and DOUBLE CHECK YOUR DAMN BIKE!!!" and:

> Therefore, after reflection, not only do I think you should attack, but you should attack from the beginning of the stage. Look, I'm not a professional cyclist by any means, but if you go out and the leaders think you're mad, you may just get away with something no one ever expected (p. 196).

Sanderson (2008a) examined PSI between fans and Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban, as Cuban blogged about his experience on American

Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) *Dancing With the Stars*. Sanderson found that

fans shared advice designed to extend Cuban's tenure on the show. Some people

offered brief suggestions, "Just remember that dancing is an expression of

yourself – relax and go with the flow," and "do *not* sing along! i know it's hard

esp. – if you have a good song…but it's distracting and doesn't come across well

on TV." Others expressed pointed, tactical counsel, "But you really need to work

on being precise in your movements…The crispness is still lacking from your

performance," and:

> On the dances, please listen to Carrie-Ann [judge]. I think she has hit on a couple of points which would help increase your score. Firstly, you should keep your tongue in your mouth. It is dancing not basketball. You remind me of a Michael Jordan on the dance floor with his signature look of his tongue hanging out of his mouth. Secondly, you should not lip synch the songs you are dancing to. To be alse [sic] to get to the top, you have to dance not lip synch, forget about Milli-Vanilli while you are dancing. Thirdly, just practice, practice, practice, as you are already doing, You will go far in this competition. But, you will need to make some these [sic] changes (p. 162).

Sanderson (2008b) investigated PSI on Boston Red Sox pitcher Curt

Schilling's blog and observed that fans' advice was stern, bordering on

reprimand. Some people told Schilling to focus more attention on baseball rather

than blogging. For example, "Just play baseball and leave the judging part to

God," "Fans pay your salary to see you pitch, not act like a tool. Just pitch bro,"

and:

> Sorry Curt, but you need to do a little less playing into the drama and get yourself into shape… mentally, physically, and emotionally. You could have done yourself a favor and burned a little less emotional energy on this and spent a little more time on the tread mill and in the gym. You came into camp completely overweight and out of shape. Then you demanded that the Sox give you an extension, when clearly you didn't

look like you wanted or earned it. You look like hell, Curt. You shouldn't have time for this kind of drama (p. 348-349).

Some individuals advised Schilling to be more consistent in practicing his

Christianity:

Gary Thorne was on air admitting that he reported an inaccuracy and stated that it was a misunderstanding and that he was wrong. So again, I don't write this as a 'come down' on you or as a session of 'pointing the finger' but we've got to be examples of Jesus' love and patience as much as possible.

And:

But my reply to you here is your witness to the wider world is not godly. I remember the interview with you after the bloody sock game. You gave God all the glory at that time. Doesn't he deserve all the glory now? Where is he in all your blogging? God is not just a very present help in time of need. He is your life and breath and everything. Don't make it all about Curt. And as for using the Holy Scriptures like bullets, out of context, and out control, that is a danger also (p. 349).

Given that fans willingly offer unsolicited advice and input to athletes, it is plausible that when athletes solicit advice, fans will overwhelmingly respond. The proliferation of Internet technologies has opened up a variety of resources for people to obtain information. Ramirez, Walther, Burgoon, and Sunnafrank (2002) observed that computer-mediated communication (CMC) creates "alternative means for gathering information not present in traditional face-to-face (FtF) contexts" (p. 214).

The trend of athletes soliciting information from fans via social media provides compelling evidence to support this claim.

Information-seeking

      Computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies have produced exponential amounts of information that is quickly available after a few keystrokes and mouse clicks. The sheer quantity of information can be daunting and a person would never reasonably be able to sift through all possible information sources. Although presenting people with overwhelming quantities of information, CMC has simultaneously amplified the ability to obtain information unobtrusively, or as other researchers have noted, to gain information about others without direct interaction (Ramirez, Walther, Burgoon, & Sunnafrank, 2002; Ramirez, Zhang, McGrew, & Lin, 2007). Ramirez et al. (2002) advanced an information-seeking model via new media predicated on three assumptions. First, information-seeking is a goal-driven activity, which once obtained, is evaluated for salience and the degree to which the goal is fulfilled governs future behavior. Second, information-seeking is multi-faceted. In other words, information-seeking encompasses a variety of formats (asynchronous or synchronous) and the greater the importance of the information, the more strategies a person will employ. Third, CMC frees people to seek information in new and unique ways, such as the ability to employ multiple strategies during the interaction.

      Ramirez et al. (2002) further discussed two information-seeking strategies in CMC. Interactive strategies consist of direct interaction with a target, characterized by tactics such as interrogation and reciprocal disclosure. Passive strategies, on the other hand, involve acquiring information via unobtrusive observation, which are the primary mode of online information-seeking (Ramirez,

2009). In one study of information-seeking via CMC, Ramirez (2009) found that interactive information-seeking produced greater interactivity and more positive relational climates. Ramirez posited that this result was attributed to the increased participation that facilitated establishing common ground and promoting mutuality. This collectiveness yielded strong perceptions of connectedness with relational partners.

Many athletes are using interactive strategies in their information-seeking requests. This is not surprising as social media provides access to large numbers of fans (often hundreds of thousands or millions). Whereas athletes are clearly not intimate with each fan, previous research has discovered that people perceive social media to be useful information-seeking sources regardless of how well they know the target (Westerman, 2008). Via social media, fans can directly and instantaneously respond to athletes and in most cases, are very willing to provide information.

Social Media: Information-Seeking Vehicles for Athletes

There have been numerous instances of athletes soliciting input from fans, and a few are profiled here. For instance, on April 30, 2010, Toronto Raptors player Chris Bosh asked his Twitter followers for input on his pending free agency. Specifically, Bosh asked, "Where should I go next season and why?" He soon clarified by posting, "Ok…Let me rephrase the question, should I stay or should I go?" On June 7, 2010, Phoenix Suns player Amare Stoudemire asked fans on Twitter to comment on his pending free agency. He asked, "I think about Free Agency Everyday. Should I Stay in Phoenix or should I leave? This the

question of the Summer. What do you guys think?" To what extent Bosh and

Stoudemire considered this commentary, if at all, is secondary, the importance

lies in the fact that Twitter enabled fans to directly respond to their questions.

On May 21, 2010, Phoenix Suns player Jared Dudley used Twitter to seek

recommendations on how the Suns could beat the Los Angeles Lakers. At the

time, the Lakers were ahead of the 2-0 (games) in the NBA Western Conference

finals. Specifically, Dudley asked, "If there are 2 things we need to do better to

win game 3 what are they? Be specific.. What do y'all see out there?" Dudley

indicated that he had over 600 responses ranging from humorous commentary to

pleas for the Suns play better defense and shoot more consistently (Young, 2010).

Sanderson (in press) profiled rookie athletes' use of Twitter, and observed

that one prominent they used Twitter was to seek information. For example,

Cincinnati Bengals player A.J. Green asked, "Where can I go and get a massage??

Need one badly;" and "Any good barber n cincy...bc I need a cut now..." New

York Islanders player Ryan Strome asked followers for information on consumer

products: "What's up with BBM not working lately? Might make the switch to an

iPhone 5. Can anyone give me details on it? When is the release date?" Arizona

Diamondbacks player Archie Bradley asked followers, "What kind of vehicle

should I get? Or where should I look?" Charlotte Bobcats player Kemba Walker

solicited help on music, "Up downloading mad old R&B songs! Wat y'all got for

me!?"

Social media has emerged as a meeting place for athletes and fans to meet

up and share information. Thus, as the Suns were nearing the end of a

disappointing season, Nash invited fans to offer input on how the Suns could improve for the following season and meet fans' expectations.

Method

Data Collection

Fan postings to Nash's Facebook page were used for analysis. Facebook is the most popular social media site, with over 845 million active users and 483 million daily active users. Approximately 80% of Facebook users are outside the United States and Canada and Facebook is available in 70 languages (Facebook.com, 2012). Facebook users can invite other Facebook users to be designated as a "friend" which results in all posts and Facebook actions being shared on one another's profiles. Facebook profiles also include an "info" section where descriptive data about the user is listed, creating discussion forums, uploading photographs and videos, and linking the page to other social media channels and websites. All pages are configured with a "wall," a Facebook feature that allows users to write and respond to commentary. Facebook users also have the ability to indicate that they "like" the page, and when this action is taken, this decision is broadcast to all the user's Facebook friends. Additionally, Facebook provides users with data that records how many Facebook users "like" the page each day, the number of daily postings on the page, and the number of daily and monthly active users.

Nash's Facebook page is linked to Nash's Twitter profile as well as the website for his foundation. At the time of this writing Nash's page was "liked" by 1,672,297 Facebook users. There were a total of 2,196 responses to Nash's post.

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For the purposes of this case study, the first 500 postings were selected for data analysis. Responses spanned a time period of 5 hours and 23 minutes.

Data Analysis

To analyze fans responses to Nash's request, a thematic analysis, using constant comparative methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was conducted. Each response served as the unit of analysis. Each response was initially read to gain a sense of what kinds of input fans were offering. During this process, postings that did not contain messages meaningful to the study (e.g., commentary unrelated to Nash's request, postings not in English, $n = 30$) were excluded from analysis. This left 470 responses available for analysis.

The postings were then micro-analyzed using a "detailed line-by-line analysis [used] to generate initial categories (with their properties and dimensions) and to suggest relationships among categories" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 57). Initial categories were guided by the types of input that fans offered. After the initial categorization of data, the author returned to the data to gain insight into the usefulness of developed categories (Suter, Bergen, Daas, & Durham, 2006). Themes were summarized and compared to ascertain similarity, and the author compared and reduced themes as much as possible while still preserving meaning. Through this process, development, clarification, and enhancement of categories continued until new observations failed to add significantly to existing categories. Additionally, due to the interpretative nature of data analysis, overlap between categories existed and the author allowed for the chance that several themes could be evident in a single posting. Analysis revealed

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that fans' input manifested in the following ways: (a) player acquisitions; (b)

internal improvements; (c) keeping the team intact; (d) dismissing problematic

players; and (e) trading Steve Nash. Each of these themes along with relevant

exemplars is now discussed.

Results and Interpretation

To indicate where a response fell in the data set, a number is attached to

each exemplar. For example, a posting with the number (200) indicates the 200th

posting in the data set. Postings are reported verbatim from the data, spelling and

grammatical errors were left intact.

Player Acquisitions

Many fans felt that the Suns needed to import additional players to

strengthen the team. In some respects, this was stated in general terms, such as,

"A good scoring 2 guard + a true power forward" (10); "the obvious thing is to

Get a big name player in order to complete" (330); and "need a star player" (293).

Other fans made requests for specific players they believed were necessary for the

Suns to improve. Examples included, "Try to get Lou Amundson..The system is

perfect for Lou! Also poosably trade Lopez for Paul Millsap" (293); "javal mcgee

would be perfect in suns style or de andre jordan from clippers: (7); and "I say try

to sign Dwight Howard and bring more attitude and arrogance to the team" (430).

A number of fans also suggested that the team re-acquire Amare Stoudemire who

had left the Suns at the conclusion of the 2010-11 season to join the New York

Knickerbockers, or other former Suns players. For instance, "GET BACK

AMARE STOUDEMIRE!!!!" (170); well they should get stat, marion, Barbosa,

diaw, joe Johnson, bell and better coach!!" (203); "Bring back amare" (183); and "get back Dragic =)" (310).

For others, the amateur player draft was an area that warranted attention. These fans were not reticent in offering advice about players the Suns could select who would improve the team. Some declared, "Lets use our draft picks to help you make the Suns a winning team again!!" (25); "draft better nba players" (147); and "draft someone that will actually get playing time and is decent aat defense" (285). Other advocated for specific players, "Draft Kemba Walker or Jimmer Fredette if they are still available" (63); "Suns need to lose out, move up in the draft, and do what ever it takes to draft Derrick Williams!" (167); and "draft jimmer fredette and teach him how to be the suns pg of the future" (213).

Nash's request opened the floodgates for fans to opine about both the types of players the Suns needed and specific players who could fill those roles. Interestingly, much input centered on former Suns players, primarily Amare Stoudemire – suggesting fans perceived a correlation between these players' departures and the team's subsequent underwhelming season. Although there are a host of considerations that factor into a team's player personnel decisions (and Stoudemire was no exception as concerns about knee surgeries lingered) fan perception is an important variable for sports teams to consider.

It is not plausible to expect that sports teams will allow fan sentiment to influence personnel decisions, nevertheless fan reactions to the potential departure of a player suggests that sports teams need to carefully consider how the player's departure will be presented to fans. For example, a player departure may generate

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less fan antipathy if the move is presented as too risk intensive or if the team identifies players who replace the player and document how the money spent on the former player will be spent to improve the team. Whereas some fans perceived that an influx of talent was needed to improve the team, other conveyed that current players needed to improve their performance and management deficiencies needed to be corrected.

Internal Improvements

Some fans contended that the Suns' problems were related to athletic performance. Accordingly, fans offered a host of input related to actual in-game situations. These admonishments included, "Play better defense, rebound better and stop shooting so many 3's" (172); "play better defense" (204); "the suns need to practice harder and be ready to face tough teams" (227); and "Suns need some discipline. Know the role, execute and hold each one accountable, that's what we do in the military" (250). There also were fans who perceived a lack of team chemistry and encouraged the Suns to remedy this problem, "you guys need to work with eachother" (79); and "whats need to do is play as am team and keep everyone as they are…next season u need to be more as a team and less as single players" (129).

Other fans offered counsel for specific players, which in some cases was quite elaborate:

> hopefully channing will imporve his post game in the off season so he can post ip bigs, hes not weak and hes mobile for a big, I think he wil find posting up other fours will be easier than guards because they arnt trying to setael it as much and he wont get double teamed" (18).

Lopez needs to step it up like bad…every game Lopez seems to blow it…and warrick needs to at least make his dunks…Vince need to bust out the bengay and do work…Nash needs to just shoot and pass later…frye needs to quit gettn stupid fouls…gortat needs to keep doing what he is doing…dudly needs to play the wing better…Brooks is just off the radar…Brooks needs to play like he did in Houston…The whole team need to quit letting leads fall onto losses…suns need to quit choking on 4th quarters…and our bend need to do work to let our main men rest (85).

Whereas some fans focused on the players need to improve, a number of fans lamented the shortcomings of Suns management in player personnel decisions. Examples included, "Fire ALL the management. Get a new owner. Hire management and new owner who will not continue to ruin one of the best franchises in the NBA" (3); "Sarver needs to hang up his hat. I've been a die hard Suns fan since moving back to PHX 9 years ago and I've watched this guy dismantle every great team" (97); "It's essential you and management decide what you guys want before the new season starst…Stop making to many trades mid season" (418); and "Sarver needs to sell to someone who puts winning before profit" (441).

Others identified shortcomings in coaching that also warranted remediation. For instance, "I love Gentry, but he needs to get better at finding the best combos of players/ when to sub (a la last year)" (325); "The team is good, but the coach couldn't handle them in the right. He is a good coach but with different team" (70); "make Duds and that ginormous polish monster in the starting line up, get Warrick and Fro Man in the rotation with some good minutes" (440); and "There's better players on the bench than Hill! Lopez brings

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a lot of energy when he gets to play, the coach don't seem to help his confidence"

(463).

Fans were not shy about offering input on how Suns players could

improve their athletic performance and frustration with Suns ownership,

management, and coaching. The responses directed at in-game productivity

denote problems that Suns fans perceived to contribute to an unsuccessful season.

Although there are a host of variables that influence a team's performance, the

admonishment that fans provided offers valuable information for sports teams to

address fans' concerns. For instance, if there is a prevailing sentiment amongst

fans that defensive intensity is lacking, sports teams can highlight practice drills

and player/coach commentary can address defensive intensity. This material can

easily be posted to a team's website which fans can connect to from various social

media platforms. Clearly, the coaching staff and management is aware of a team's

deficiencies, but considering areas that fans perceive to be lacking and integrating

content that speaks to these concerns would be a convenient and forward thinking

step for many sports teams social media efforts.

The commentary centering on ownership and management also offers an

insight into dissent processes in sports. Previous research suggests that social

media are valuable tools for sports organizations to cultivate dissent (Sanderson,

2009a). Whereas sports organizations may not concur with the opinions being

voiced, these expressions provide important information that can be used to

assuage fans' disagreements with team operations. In this case, fans perceived

that Suns ownership and management were too focused on cost-cutting instead of

providing a winning product. Taking this information, the Suns could develop a public relations campaign to address this concern. Such an effort could focus on the need to take "lumps" to return to success. This temporary downturn could be supported by research on other teams who have suffered briefly in order to return to promise. In doing so, while fans may not "accept" the organization's decisions, they may understand them more.

The focus on internal improvements progresses into the next theme in the data - input that suggested the Suns needed to keep the team together. For these fans, the Suns were close to returning to their winning ways, and this proximity warranted patience.

Keeping the Team Intact

Some Suns fans implored the team to avoid shaking up the roster, and instead work on promoting continuity with the current players. For instance, "Keep the roster you have now and stop making changes, give the players a chance to bond. You have the lineup you need to win, but they need a chance to get to know each other" (437); "We will be a good team if teams stays the same all year." (458); "Patience is a virtue that Phoenix does not possess, unfortunately. I say stop making so many changes and encourage off-court team time" (47); and "stop juggling the roster every year! if we had stuck in principle to the rosters of your MVP years, then things would have been better" (147). Others fan specifically advised that it was imperative that Nash remain on the Suns. Examples included, "we need you to stay Steve" (429); "JUST STAY YOUR

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ONE OF THE BEST WE GOT RIGHT NOW STEVE!" (146); and "Hopefully

you stay and take part in a rebuild process! You are the heart of the team." (222).

For these fans, it was crucial that the Suns avoid altering the roster and

give the players a chance to develop. These sentiments cannot be ignored and

have important implications for sports teams. Kahane and Shmanske (1997)

examined how player turnover affected attendance for Major League Baseball

(MLB) teams. They discovered that that player turnover negatively affected

attendance. More specifically, they found that teams lost, on average, 27% of their

players which corresponded to a yearly decrease in attendance of 6,000 – 12,000

fans for each percentage of change. However, Morse, Shapiro, McEvoy, and

Rascher (2008) explored player turnover in the NBA and found that player

turnover produced no significant effects on attendance. While the research results

are mixed, teams can use this information as a resource to buffer fan criticism.

Thus, by keeping a team intact, sports teams can promote the team unity and

cohesion that will result, which identifies with fans who are content to see the

team keep its structure. These fans can then be employed to promote the team

personnel model with other fans. However, just as research has been inconsistent,

so too were fans' views on roster turnover.

Dismissing Problematic Players

Whereas some fans clamored for the Suns to keep the team together,

others were adamant that certain players be removed from the team. These players

were viewed as detrimental to the future success of the Suns, and therefore,

needed to be cut off from the team before inflicting additional damage. One of the

popular targets for fans was Vince Carter. Carter had enjoyed early career

success, but after signing large contracts had bounced around the NBA and had

seen his superstar status diminish. Fans declared, "LOSE VINCE CANCER!!!"

(54); "Get rid of Vince Carter. He is not happy here and his play shows it" (180);

"get rid of carter. HUGE blow of suckness" (439); and "Get rid of VC!: (377).

These feelings were amplified by one fan who commented, "Pass out rifles and

allow fans to take potshots at Vince Carter's lifeless carcass" (334).

Other Suns players were targeted by Suns fans as well. For example,

"Aaron Brooks needs to go, he is putting up some points which is great, but he

shows know aggressiveness and turnovers shortly follow" (277); "Robin Lopez

has worn out his welcome, he's been given starting opportunities and has failed to

impress or be consistent. He's error prone, and just a waste of all that height"

(337); "trade robin lopez for a faster more athletic center then him" (342); and

"get rid of lopez. He sucks so much he plays like a girl with no post moves"

(450).

Although some of these expressions were problematic and hostile, they

nonetheless demonstrated that Suns fans had tired of certain players (primarily

Vince Carter and Robin Lopez). The Suns ultimately released Carter, but as of

this writing, Lopez remains on the team. It is implausible for a sports team to

move a player solely based on fan sentiment but fan perception of players is an

important component that must be considered during the player personnel

process. For example, Fink, Parker, Brett, and Higgins (2009) found that some

fans abstained from attending games after teams signed players with checkered

personal lives. Although it is unlikely that fans will boycott en masse, fans may disconnect their identity from the team if certain players are brought in. This can result in lost revenues and goodwill in the community and teams may want to weigh fan perceptions when adding players. Conversely, when the team parts ways with a problematic player, fans may return to the fold and this is an opportunity for teams to repair their relationships with fans.

Fans clearly had contempt for Carter and Lopez and advocated for these players to be cast off from the team. Interestingly, fans also advised that Nash should leave the Suns for another team. However, this input was not grounded in contempt, but rather in appreciation. Accordingly, fans implored Nash to play for another team so he could obtain a championship – an accomplishment that seemed to be waning the longer he remained with the Suns.

Trading Steve Nash

One need only look at the drama that unfolded when LeBron James elected to voluntarily leave the Cleveland Cavaliers after the 2010 NBA season, to witness the extreme fan behavior that results when a player willingly leaves a team. Thus, it was surprising that a number of fans encouraged Nash to leave the Suns. For many of these fans, an NBA championship was a distant possibility for the Suns, and as Nash was reaching the twilight of his career, they encouraged him to play elsewhere. Some of this input was very simple and concise, "i'll tell you what you need to do, you need to leave phoenix" (89); "Nash take low salary and go to miami u deserve a title with you theyll get you one" (105); "I only think they need to trade you! You deserve to play for a contender" (231); and "You

need to get the hell out of pheonix. Free Steve Nash" (302). Other input indicated

that Nash had paid his dues in Phoenix and there would no hard feelings if he left

for greener pastures. Examples included, "Can YOU just go to a different team in

the off season you deserve Better for real" (20); "they need to trade u to a good

team where u can get that ring you deserve" (309); "Please get that ring you

deserve! I think you cant do it here leave Phoenix! I wanna see you win a title

before you retire" (338); "I am a Suns fan, but at this point Grant Hill and

yourself deserve a championship ring. I would be glad to see you go and win a

ring with another team! Keep strong" (500); and:

> Steve I am one of the fans that would love to see you stay with the Suns
> but, I understand that you have done more for the program than anyone
> could possibly ask. You deserve a ring if that's what you want (331).

The advice extended to Nash reflects the supportive communication that

athletes can engender via social media (Kassing & Sanderson, 2009b; Sanderson,

2010a). With the demonstrative and hostile reactions that mark fan behavior when

athletes or sports figures leave sports teams, social media provides a platform

where athletes can gauge fan response to their impending playing decisions.

Indeed, several players such as Amare Stoudemire and Chris Bosh both solicited

input from fans via Twitter when facing their free agency (Sanderson, 2011).

Using social media may not entirely prevent hostile fan reaction, but it may

prepare athletes for fan responses, which should be factored into their public

communication if they ultimately elect to change teams. Additionally, there are a

number of variables that may influence whether fans react positively or negatively

to an athlete voluntarily leaving a team. These may include the player's tenure

with the team, the player's status (elite vs. non-elite), the player's position, and player's off-the-field behavior. At this point, these factors are uncertain and await research attention. What is certain, however, is that social media is a viable mechanism for athletes to incorporate to gauge fan input.

Discussion

This case explored the types of input that fans offered to a professional athlete. This case demonstrates the utility that social media provide for sports teams in several important ways. First, social media provides a feedback mechanism for sports teams that can be used to gauge fan reaction to various organizational decisions. In this case, the input was solicited by a player, but non-playing organizational members (e.g., marketing, public relations) and management-level employees (e.g., General Manager) can utilize social media for these purposes as well. Thus, sports organizations can assess how fans are responding to organizational decisions and tailor responses accordingly. This feedback can certainly be obtained in other ways, but social media offers the most convenient and instantaneous way of obtaining such data.

Second, sports organizations can use social media to assess fan support for organizational decisions. For instance, if a team is considering signing a controversial player, a team representative could post on Facebook that the team is considering signing the player and then observe fan commentary. If commentary is overwhelmingly negative, sports teams may pass on signing the player, or if they ultimately sign the player, can craft public relations campaigns to assuage fan concerns. Social media has ushered in an era of instantaneous

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feedback (Campbell, Pitt, Parent, & Berthon, 2011) and sports organizations simply cannot ignore these information repositories.

Third, sports organizations must not avoid negative or critical commentary from fans – instead they should embrace it, and social media is a great tool to facilitate this process. For instance, a common complaint from some fans is that the team is eschewing winning in favor of cost-cutting or profit. While this organizational pursuit may be necessary, sports teams can use social media to promote fan understanding. Thus, team executives could broadcast a message via the team's website to fans about why cost-cutting is taking place. Fans could then be encouraged to submit questions via Facebook or Twitter to the team executives that would then be answered during the telecast. After the telecast, teams could monitor fan commentary via social media to assess the effectiveness of the broadcast, and re-assess as needed. Via social media, sports teams and athletes have optimal venues to engage fans and these opportunities should be frequently employed.

Discussion Questions

1. How might sports organizations utilize social media to receive input from fans? For example, think about promotions, marketing, and community relations aspects of a sports organization?

2. Under what circumstances should an athlete utilize social media to solicit input from fans? Under what circumstances should they refrain from doing so?

3.   In some cases, sports organizations may profit from an idea that a fan willingly provides via social media. In this case, the labor provided by fans is free. Is that problematic? Why or Why Not?

4.   When sports teams receive input from fans that is negative or critical, how should they respond?

5.   To what extent should a sports team consider fan input with respect to adding or releasing players?

6.   Managing and coaching in professional sports is intense. Do fans really have the qualifications to offer input about player personnel and coaching?

Activities

1.   You work in public relations for a professional sports team. The team president informs you that the team is seeking to have a publicly-financed stadium built, but is concerned about how this request will be received due to the current economic conditions. The president asks you to develop a social media campaign that can be used to obtain feedback from the public. He requests that you present the campaign to team executives in two weeks. Design a social media campaign to present to team executives.

2.   You work as an agent for an NFL player. The player was drafted two years ago and still has two years to go on his current contract. The player just finished a stellar season in which he broke several team receiving records. The player wants you to negotiate a new contract. You meet with the player and agree that the player should gauge fan reaction to this

request. How would you suggest the player use social media to obtain this information while not causing alarm with the team?

3.   You are the Vice-President of Public Relations for a Major League Baseball Team. The team maintains an active presence on social media. The owner is notorious for cutting-costs that often results in fielding an uncompetitive team. One of your Public Relations managers informs you that fans have been criticizing the team's approach on several social media outlets. You inform the owner of this and are told the fans will have to "deal with it." Design a social media campaign that will help the owner see that engaging the fans is a more optimal solution.

Chapter 3

AGENDA-SETTING VIA TWITTER: THE CASE OF THE NFLPA

The National Football League (NFL) is the most popular North American

sport and generates $9 billion dollars in revenues annually (Battista, 2011a). After

the conclusion of the 2010-11 season, significant media attention shifted to the

March 3, 2011 expiration of the collective bargaining agreement between players

and NFL owners. This labor storm had been brewing for several years and both

sides had warned that a work stoppage was inevitable. The primary sticking point

in the collective bargaining negotiations was how to divide these revenues

between players and owners. Under the previous collective bargaining agreement,

the NFL received an immediate $1 billion dollars of revenues, with the remaining

amount being split 60/40 in favor of the players (Battista, 2011a). Owners wanted

to take an additional $1 billion dollars while the players association sought a

50/50 split of revenues.

When March 3, 2011, arrived, an agreement had not been reached, yet

both sides continued negotiating. However, on March 12, 2011, no progress had

been made, and thus, a day that many NFL fans dreaded arrived when NFL

owners locked out the players. In April, 2011, the NFL temporarily halted the

lockout so the annual amateur draft could be held, but once the draft concluded,

the lockout resumed. This labor dispute received considerable media attention as

fans were faced with the possibility of the 2011-12 season being cancelled. As the

spring and summer of 2011 progressed, the labor dispute was characterized by

significant legal action and mediation attempts. As pressure from both the media

and the public intensified, progress slowly began to be made, and finally, on July

21, 2011, the players voted to ratify a new 10 year labor agreement (Battista,

2011b).

The period of uncertainty created by the labor dispute and the public

investment in the NFL necessitated that both sides actively engage the public via

the media. Whereas scholars have noted the media's influence during labor

impasses (Gunster, 2005; Ryan, 2004), the media analyzed in these disputes have

been traditional channels (e.g., newspapers, television), but the use of social

media in labor disagreements has yet to receive considerable research attention.

This case addresses this gap by exploring how the NFL Players Association

(NFLPA) utilized Twitter (via @NFLLockout) to promote their agenda. Social

media affords individuals and organizations the ability to construct and

disseminate messages to wide audiences and interact with them. Sanderson and

Kassing (2011) noted that via social media, athletes are able to engage in a form

of agenda-setting, as they break news, which the mass media then picks up and

reports. This capability also extends to sports organizations and becomes

paramount during stormy climates (such as labor disputes) to provide commentary

and transfer object salience to the public.

The four major sports in North America – the NFL, NBA, National

Hockey League (NHL) and Major League Baseball (MLB) all operate under

collective bargaining agreements that must be re-negotiated at regular intervals.

Thus, when labor negotiations commence, sports leagues and players associations

must incorporate social media to get their messages disseminated to the public and engage and interact with the public to promote support for their positions.

Literature Review

Agenda-Setting

Agenda-setting is one of the most prominent mass communication theories (Shehata, 2010). Agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) emphasizes the mass media's influence on audiences – namely that although the mass media does not tell audiences what to think it does tell them *what to think about*. This outcome is accomplished through the frequency and salience in reporting certain stories, which facilitates audiences to perceive these issues as more important (Wu & Coleman, 2009). This particular process has come to be termed in the literature as "first-level" agenda-setting. Yet, researchers have now conceptualized "second-level" agenda-setting which considers the influence of the properties and qualities and tones that describe people or objects in the news (McCombs & Ghanem, 1991; Wu & Coleman, 2009).

These second-level agenda-setting components fall in one of two dimensions: substantive and affective. The substantive category is comprised of concepts such as persona and ideology, whereas the affective category consists of the emotion-based qualities of substantive components (Wu & Coleman, 2009). For instance, a football coach's personality (substantive) can be covered positively, negatively, or neutrally (affective). Second-level agenda-setting mirrors first-level agenda-setting in that the attributes of an object are transferred to audiences in similar ways as issue salience.

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Agenda-setting research has largely centered on traditional media such as newspapers and television. However, with the rise of digital media, scholars have questioned whether traditional mass media channels still maintain their historical influence (Shehata 2010; Stanyer, 2007). Digital technologies have spawned inter-media agenda-setting processes (Lee, 2007) and fragmented media markets as media consumers can now select from numerous media outlets who vie for audience attention (Schoenbach, De Waal, & Lauf, 2005). Additionally, digital media and traditional media are now intertwined and shape one another, shifting agenda-setting to a more integrative state (Ragas & Kiousis, 2010).

Although digital media must now be part of the agenda equation, results are still mixed about which avenue offers more agenda-setting utility. Shehata (2010) examined agenda-setting effects during the 2006 Swedish national elections and observed a 17% increase in participants naming unemployment as the most important political issue, which corresponded with this issue receiving significant media attention during the election cycle. Coleman and McCombs (2007) examined agenda-setting effects with younger and older individuals and discovered that issues of importance to younger people correlated with the media agenda, although these participants used the Internet more than traditional media. Other research indicates that the volume of news coverage dispensed via traditional channels spikes Internet searches (Weeks & Southwell, 2010). The design of websites may reduce agenda-setting effects as users have more flexibility to find content, compared to the linear format of television, radio, and newspapers (Conway & Patterson, 2008).

Some research, however, suggests that digital media supersedes traditional media. Using a sample of political blogs and two traditional news media, Meraz (2011) found that traditional media were unable to set political blogs' agenda, whereas the political blogs set the traditional media's agenda, including to some extent, the newsroom's blog agenda. This is to some degree, influenced by audience nature, as Meraz (2009) observed that traditional media held gatekeeping priority with passive news-reading audience members. Given these inconsistent results, more work is warranted. Sports represents a burgeoning area for agenda-setting research given the prominent place sports hold in the media landscape.

Agenda-Setting and Sports

Agenda-setting plays a prominent role in sports coverage (Billings et al. 2008). One notable area where this occurs is broadcaster commentary. Scholars have observed that the success and failure of some athletes is often attributed to race, with Black athletes' athleticism framed as inherent whereas White athletes' athleticism is a product of intellectual training (Buffington, 2005; Mercurio & Filak, 2010; Whannel, 1992). The work of Billings and colleagues (Billings & Angelini, 2007; Billings et al. 2008) extended this research into the realm of Olympic commentary. Important findings emanating from this research include that White athletes receive more descriptors of excellent concentration; Asian athletes are frequently described as more composed and Black athletes receive minimal commentary about their lack of a particular skill when compared to athletes of other races.

Agenda-setting also plays an important role in sporting disputes. Seltzer and Dittmore (2009) explored second-level agenda-setting to analyze media coverage of the National Football League's (NFL) dispute with cable operators over the NFL Network. They discovered that initially the NFL received more positive media coverage and its message resonated at greater levels with the media than that of the cable operators. However, they noted that as the impasse prolonged and fans were faced with the possibility of losing broadcasts, blame shifted to both the NFL and cable operators. Thus, time plays is an important variable in a sports organization's ability to receive positive media coverage. Labor disputes are significant issues in sports. These events receive considerable press coverage and fans are heavily invested as the risk of losing games is faced. These impasses can become so prolonged that the seasons are cancelled or shortened such as when Major League Baseball cancelled the World Series in 1994 and the National Hockey League cancelled the 2004-05 season. When these situations occur, favorable media coverage is an important consideration to which both sides must attend.

Labor Disputes and Media Coverage

The media plays an influential role in how labor disputes are publicly portrayed (Gunster, 2005; Miller, 1999). Researchers have noted that mainstream media coverage often tends to favor management in reporting labor strife (Tracy, 2006). For example, Tracy (2006) explored how *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report* covered the 1962-1963 strike of the International Typographical Union Local 6 against New York City newspapers. His results indicated that these

outlets reported the strike in favorable ways for the newspaper publishers while simultaneously misrepresenting the union's rationale for the strike. The degree to which management and labor are given the opportunity to participate in the shaping of coverage also influences public perceptions of labor impasses. Gunster (2005) investigated reporting of a British Columbia school teachers strike and found that one news show allowed teachers to become involved in the reporting of the strike, which shaped the discussion of the strike in ways that counteracted the strike's reporting in mainstream newspaper and television shows. Ryan (2004) analyzed the Teamsters' use of media during a 1997 strike with United Parcel Service. Ryan argued that via the media, collective action is magnified by mobilizing supporters across geographical boundaries and accessing influential supporters. Other research suggests that a person's level of involvement with an issue is a predictor of media coverage influencing their perception about that issue (Christen, Kannaovakun, & Gunther, 2002).

These capabilities are even more pronounced when social media enters the equation. That is, whereas an organization may find sympathetic allies in some traditional mass media outlets, social media enables them to have unprecedented autonomy over the shaping of the message *and* provides a forum for interaction with the public. Banks (2010) profiled how the Writers Guild of America used digital media during their 2007-08 strike. She found that digital media was a vital communication tool for the striking television writers to maintain frequent contact with each other, the media and the public. Interaction with public is a key avenue for both sides of a labor dispute to pursue as mobilizing public opinion can re-

configure how these events are reported (Kumar, 2001) and social media provides an optimal tool to accomplish interaction.

Moreover, given the importance of feeling involved in an issue, social media provides a conduit for involvement to be stimulated and reinforced. Much research argues that social media endows organizations with a "personal" quality that is lacking in traditional one-way communication messages. This feature has been conceptualized in the literature as the "conversational human voice" (Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher & Miller, 2006). When organizations find themselves facing a difficult situation that is playing out publicly, social media enables them to: (a) have control over message production and dissemination; and (b) facilitate interaction with the public and key allies (e.g., journalists) to generate favorable attitudes towards the organization. Thus, it was not surprising that when the NFL lockout began, the NFLPA turned to Twitter to communicate with the public.

Method

Data Collection

Data were obtained from the @NFLLockout twitter feed that was operated by the NFL Players Association. Twitter is one of most popular social media forums at the present time. Twitter started in 2006 and has now grown to 462 million registered users, and is expected to hit 500 million users in by the 2nd quarter of 2012. At the present time, Twitter has 100 million active users (defined as accessing the account at least once per month) and is expected to hit 250 million active users by the end of 2012 (Bennett, 2012). Twitter is a micro-blogging site that allows users to create messages, termed "tweets," that are no

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more than 140 characters in length. One's Twitter account is linked to a username preceded by the @symbol. Twitter users become connected to one another by choosing to "follow" another Twitter user. Each tweet a person sends is transmitted to their "followers" who can reply to the tweet by adding their own commentary, or re-tweeting (re-transmitting) the message to that person's followers. Twitter has become the social media tool of choice for athletes and sports reporters (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010; Sanderson & Kassing, 2011; Schultz & Sheffer, 2010; Sheffer & Schultz, 2010).

Data Analysis

To analyze the ways that @NFLLockout was used to set the agenda, a thematic analysis, using constant comparative methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was conducted. Tweets from the March 3, 2011 (the date the collective bargaining agreement expired) through July 21, 2011 (the date the players ratified the new collective bargaining agreement) were selected for analysis. This yielded a total of 528 tweets. Each tweet served as the unit of analysis. Each tweet was initially read to gain a sense of the agenda-setting function of the tweet. The tweets were then micro-analyzed and classified into emergent categories based on agenda-setting function of the tweet. After the initial categorization of data, the author returned to the data to gain insight into the usefulness of developed categories (Suter, Bergen, Daas, & Durham, 2006). Themes were summarized and compared to ascertain similarity, and the author compared and reduced themes as much as possible while still preserving meaning. Through this process, development, clarification, and enhancement of categories continued until new

observations failed to add significantly to existing categories. Additionally, due to the interpretative nature of data analysis, overlap between categories existed and the author allowed for the chance that several themes could be evident in a single posting.

Analysis revealed that agenda-setting occurred through: (a) linking to events/content; (b) promoting NFLPA favorably; (c) criticizing the NFL; and (d) fan engagement.

Results and Interpretation

To indicate where a tweet fell in the data set, a number is attached to each exemplar. For example, a tweet with the number (82) indicates the 82nd tweet in the data set. Tweets are reported verbatim from the data, spelling and grammatical errors were left intact. Many of the tweets were embedded with links to other places on the web. For ease of reading, the notation [link] has been inserted to denote where the link was located in the tweet, rather than providing the actual link.

Linking to Events/Content

One of the predominant ways the @NFLLockout account was used was to re-direct readers to other web locations where information and events could be consumed. Twitter served as a "hub" that connected audience members to other places on the web. This included public commentary from NFLPA Executive Director DeMaurice Smith, "Watch the entire @DeSmithNFLPA/@NFLLockout @ustream to catch an exclusive message from De to you fans: [link]" (30); "Miss @DeSmithNFLPA's interview w/ @wingoz on @NFLLiveESPN re: Judge

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Nelson's ruling? Watch it here: [link]" (327); and "Video" @DeSmithNFLPA

Speaks to University of Virginia Students [link]" (248). Twitter also served as a

mechanism to direct fans to information about the status of the lockout, "Brady, et

al. v. NFL Preliminary Injunction Order [link]" (324); "RT @NFLPA #NFLPA

Renounces Union Status: What Does This Mean?" (106); and "More from

yesterday's conference call w/ @drewbrees, Kevin Mawae, Jeff Saturday +

others: [link]" (140).

The NFLPA made a number of current and former players available for

chats via video sharing site Ustream and promoted these events via Twitter,

"Scott Fujita talking labor updates on our #ustream chat now [link] Got a question

for him/others? Ask @NFLLockout" (150); Carolina Panthers DB Thomas Davis

coming upon the #Ustream [link] Let's hear your Q's Panthers fans!" (181); and

"Priest Holmes, Daryl Talley and "Hacksaw" Jim Duggan are also confirmed for

today's chat! Noon EST! [link] #LetUsPlay" (206). Twitter also was employed to

publicize NFLPA promotions and campaigns. Examples included, "Just 2 days till

the #NFLDraft. Go to Facebook.com/NFLPA to make predictions & u could win

a phone call from that player on Friday" (328); and "Watch our 1st

#LockoutMeans vide [link] then share what a #lockoutmeans to you. We'll RT

you!" (45). One particularly interesting promotion that occurred was linking fans

to video and photo footage of player organized workouts. This served to both

inform fans that players were diligently maintaining their physical conditioning

and to provide evidence documenting this claim. For instance, "Gotta love seeing

this!! #LetUsPlay RT @George Atallah At players' organized workouts. A vide

from Redskins "camp" [link]" (406); "Now on www.nfllockout.com: Players

working Hard Despite Owner-Imposed Lockout: [link]" (448); and "#Falcons

players leading workouts, too RT @AJCFalcons Julio Jones to have his first

workout w/ Falcons today. [link]" (409).

Twitter also directed fans to stories about the lockout from media outlets.

Thus, while the NLFPA was investing its own resources in setting the agenda,

Twitter offered a mechanism to link to stories that complemented that agenda. For

example, "Kick off the week right with this must read Sally Jenkins article on the

#NFL lockout: [link] #BlockTheLockout #LetUsPlay" (40); "QUESTION: What

right do owners have to padlock stadiums that taxpayers helped pay for? [link] via

@washingtonpost @SallyJenx" (144); "Making Tight Ends Meet: Rick Reilly fr

@ESPN – players looking at side jobs while #NFL has locked them out [link]"

(300); and "Rookies (as well as Free Agents) are inherently suffering irreparable

harm via @cbssportsnfl [link] #LifttheLockout" (393).

The @NFLLockout connected fans with a plethora of information

pertaining to the NFLPA's efforts to promote their agenda during the lockout.

This information was embedded across a variety of platforms (e.g., websites,

social media sites) and Twitter served as the hub for these domains. Via Twitter,

the NFLPA conveniently exposed audiences to multiple platforms where that

supported the NFLPA's position. This connectivity also provided fans with

"insider" access (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010a) that augmented the claims the

NFLPA was making. For example, the NFLPA certainly could have mentioned

that players were working out, but by providing video and photographic evidence,

fans could be persuaded that the players were doing their share to resolve the lockout and therefore, culpability for the lockout shifted to the NFL. In addition to linking fans to content and information, Twitter also functioned as a conduit to broadcast favorable messages about the NFLPA and its membership.

Promoting the NFLPA Favorably

Through Twitter, the NFLPA distributed frequent messages lauding the organization and its membership. Examples included, "manning, brady and brees have won five super bowls in seven appearances & are among game's greatest ambassadors" (11); "#NFL players teamed w/ @FEMA to aid those affected by the #Joplin tornado. Watch to see how you can help: [link] pls RT" (444); and "What a great day! My boys had a blast at @LarryFitzgerald charity game and getting a pic with him! [link]" (335). Tweets also were deployed that reminded fans that it was the NFLPA, not the NFL, that truly cared about the fans. These messages were characterized by comments such as "DeMaurice Smith says union won't let fans down [link]" (37); "'We appreciate you fans. We dig you guys. We're working as hard as we can to get a deal done.' - @DeSmithNFLPA [link]" (74); "TO THE FANS: 'Stick with us. This process is about getting on the field in 2011.' – #Texans OL Eric Winston #LetUsPlay" (166); and "@DeSmithNFLPA chatting it up with fans…letting them know how much he digs their support #LetUsPlay #OpenTheBook [link]" (75).

Tweets also consisted of quotes from NFLPA leadership and membership denoting that they were working diligently to consummate a new collective bargaining agreement, "We've been doing everything in our power to get a deal

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done" – Chris Carr Baltimore #Ravens CB #ustream [link]" (152); "London

Fletcher: 'We want to work. We want to play football. This is what we're used to

doing. We don't want to be locked out.' #Redskins" (411); and this quote from

Drew Brees, "To our fans – I give you my word that we as players are doing

everything we can to negotiate with the NFL towards a fair deal" (86).

Twitter enabled the NFLPA to disseminate a variety of messages that

depicted the NLFPA and its membership in a favorable light. These messages

were not only constructed organically, but the ability to re-tweet messages from

players and fans about their positive experiences added credibility to the

NFLPA's position. Twitter offers a tool to directly facilitate involvement with the

public and to reinforce this involvement through re-tweets. This is an important

capability considering that involvement with an issue is a predictor of media

coverage influencing their perception about that issue (Christen, Kannaovakun, &

Gunther, 2002). Thus, if a fan is involved with athletes via social media, this may

rebuff the likelihood that they will be swayed by media reports that frame athletes

unfavorably. Twitter was a valuable resource to optimize the NFLPA's self-

presentation, yet it also provided a mechanism to simultaneously discredit their

adversary at the time – the NFL.

Criticizing the NFL

Twitter served as a hub to connect readers to content and information

about the lockout, and this also extended to linking readers to information that

cast the NFL in an unfavorable position. For instance, "Hey, #NFL, why can't

you just #OpenTheBooks? Not hard. @NFLPA @nfl @nfllabor @NFLLockout"

(77); and "Forbes' list of Billionaires Includes Several #NFL Owners: [link] #OpenTheBooks #LetUsPlay #BlockTheLockout" (83). Still other tweets declared, "Owner-imposed #lockout preventing #Packers players from attending White House and receiving Super Bowl rings: [link]" (314); "RT @darrenrovell: #NFL TV hearing in Minny today. What drives fans nuts the most? That the league would make MORE from DirecTV w/no season" (378); "NFL Teams, Owners Ordered to Stop Unlawful Attempts to Reduce Workers Compensation Benefits to Injured NFL Players [link]" (229); "RT @QuentinGroves52: it's amazing the NFL lifted the lockout just in time for the draft…To get fans to watch…Then locked us out right after" (359); and "RT @SI_JimTrotter:…NFL owners who are using the lockout to reduce support staff salaries should be ashamed" (373).

A unique way that the NFLPA disparaged the NFL was by linking readers to stories about how the lockout was affecting the general public. This included messages such as, #LockoutMeans no more fantasy football" (47); "canceled season could cost the Charlotte economy at least $100 million, tourism officials say (via @theobserver) [link]" (250); and "New on NFLLockout.com: Boston-Area Businesses Hurt By Lockout [link]" (481). This also occurred by providing quotes from and stories about specific people impacted by the lockout, "Interesting local lockout story on @news14 about how HS band would lose $25K in fundraising dollars if they couldn't work concessions" (5); and "'[The lockout is] going to hurt my job, my company, my hometown' – Joey, 23 Beer Sales Rep from Indianapolis #NFL #Colts" (122).

Twitter enabled the NFLPA to distribute information that raised questions about the veracity of the NFL's position in the labor dispute. This was done directly through commentary and indirectly via positioning stories about people affected by the lockout as evidence implicating the greed of billionaire owners. Social media enables labor organizations to broadly disseminate inflammatory information about the organization, which is now supplemented with, rather than driven by the mass media. In other words, rather than relying solely on the mass media and taking chances with how positive/negative management will be presented, social media allows labor organizations to assertively disseminate this news to the public. This distribution and promulgation all emanates from the digital hub that is Twitter. Beyond serving as a digital nexus, social media sites such as Twitter promote fan interaction, which serves as an agenda-setting function as organizations can widely promote the support they receive from fans.

Fan Engagement

Previous research indicates that social media can be used by athletes to generate support for their views and commentary (Sanderson, 2010a) and to provide exclusive or "insider" information to fans that would be difficult to otherwise obtain. In this case, the NFLPA encouraged fan interaction and promoted supportive fan commentary. In doing so, the organization magnified perceptions of humanness (Kelleher 2009, Kelleher & Miller, 2006) with fans. One way this occurred was through the #LockoutMeans campaign. On March 8, 2011, this campaign was launched and fans were encouraged to participate with the lure of a re-tweet. Responses from fans included, "@NFLLockout The

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@lockoutmeans to me, no more going to Saints games to check out the Saintsations with my binoculars. #BlockTheLockout" (49); "@NFLLockout The #lockoutmeans to me, no more HOUSTON TEXANS training camps or football games to be screaming my head off at. #BlockTheLockout" (52); and "@NFLLockout Lockout means no @49ers football ☹ and no 'Rally Fridays' when we wear our @49ers gear to work/school #BlockTheLockout" (55). Through this simple request, fans were encouraged to share how much they would miss football experiences during the lockout. As these feelings were shared, the personal consequences became more tangible and shifted blame for the lockout away from the NFLPA to the NFL.

Fans also were encouraged to submit questions about the lockout which would then be answered via the @NFLLockout account. Not surprisingly questions were rapidly submitted, providing a unique opportunity to interact with fans, "@_michael23 we're asking for the same thing. The players want to play. Fans want to watch. Owners have locked us all out. #LetUsPlay" (130); "@TheCoverTwo Morning. Players can discuss and work towards a settlement. Players can't collectively bargaining #lockoutchat #lockoutchat" (269); and "@lionswinter Ultimate resolution would be NFL games! Like kyle vanden bosch told you. Lions could be really good this year. #lockoutchat" (277). While fans could submit questions via Twitter, the NFLPA held a face-to-face question and answer session that Twitter helped promote, "Tweet at us if you are headed to @The4040 Club 6 W. 25th Street NYC for our #tweetup #NYC!" (333); and "Everyone come out to the 40/40 club and say what's up to us!!" (334).

Fan engagement functioned as an agenda-setting mechanism by elevating perceptions of closeness and involvement with fans. Social media is facilitating more social interaction between fans and athletes (Kassing and Sanderson, 2010a) and this appears to be the case with sports organizations as well. In this situation, the NFL deployed campaigns, via Twitter hashtags to solicit fan disclosure which was then used to promote the NFLPA's agenda. The avenues for interaction that Twitter has created for fans with athletes extend to sports organizations and as a result, they cannot be ignored. Sports organizations should utilize social media during troubling times – such as labor disputes – to engage fans. In doing so, important dialogue will occur that can be used to strengthen the organization's agenda.

Discussion

This case explored how the NFLPA employed Twitter as an agenda-setting tool during the 2011 lockout. This case holds important implications for sports organizations that are now discussed. First, simply put, when sports organizations experience a crisis, social media cannot be ignored. Social media offers a convenient tool to strategically connect stakeholders with a plethora of information that is favorable to the organization while critiquing adversaries. When crisis hits, sports organizations need to act assertively to get information disseminated while aligning with supporters in the mass media. Social media facilitates involvement – a component that cannot be underscored. Through social media, fans can be solicited for input, and can be acknowledged via re-tweets and

using tools such as Twitter hastags, fan responses can be amassed and re-distributed to further the organization's agenda.

Second, during times of crisis, social media provides sports organizations with a cost-efficient relational maintenance tool. Social media are a vital resource for organization image repair (Kelleher & Miller, 2006) and adept social media use significantly affects perceptions of leadership and organizational performance (Garcia-Morales, Ruiz-Moreno, & Llorens-Montes, 2007; George & Sleeth, 2000). Social media puts a human element (Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher & Miller, 2006) upon the organization, and enables fractured relationships to quickly heal. Indeed, organizations depend greatly on their relationships with external publics to ensure continued operational success (Ramani & Kumar, 2008). When an organization experiences a crisis that fractures relationships, relational maintenance is a crucial action step. Social media, then, becomes an optimal way for these organizations to perform relational maintenance as it provides cost-effective ways to connect with external audiences. Thus, in situations such as labor disputes, social media bolsters relational maintenance efforts by hastening identification between the organization and its customers and other stakeholders.

Third, social media is an essential public relations tool for organizations. Organizations can no longer remain passive and let news organizations and adversaries shape public perception – organizations must embrace social media. Organizations who ignore social media do so at their own peril. Researchers have posited that Twitter is the leading social media outlet for public relations (Waters, Tindall, & Morton, 2010; Waters & Williams, 2011) and this certainly holds true

for the sports world. Social media allows organizations to converge with

journalists and integrate them into their public relations, rather than enacting

public relations as a result of unfavorable journalism (Avery, Lariscy, &

Sweetser, 2010). As this case suggests, social media optimizes the ability for

sports organizations to drive and shape their agenda through interconnection with

fans and reporters, and is now firmly entrenched as a major player in the sports

world.

Discussion Questions

1. This case looked at agenda-setting in the context of a labor dispute. In
    what other situations might social media help a sports organization drive
    their agenda?

2. The NFLPA provided audience members with a wealth of information. At
    what point does information saturation take over? When does it become
    "too much information?"

3. Is it beneficial to include photographs and videos with social media
    postings? How might this help or hurt a sports organization drive their
    agenda?

4. How might an athlete use social media to drive his/her agenda? If his/her
    agenda conflicts with that of the sports organizations, what variables
    would persuade fans to support the athlete over the sports team or vice-
    versa?

5. The data in this study did not contain any negative comments directed towards the NFLPA. If a fan had posted critical commentary, how would you recommend the NFLPA respond?

6. Could social media provide agenda-setting benefits to a non-mainstream professional sport? Why or Why Not?

Activities

1. Compare how the mainstream media covers/has covered a sports organization during a crisis with how the sports organization frames/framed itself. What differences emerge? Which entity does a better job of driving their agenda?

2. You and your team operate a sports media consultancy. You are hired by a group that wants a playoff-system to be implemented in college football. Design a social media campaign to drive this agenda and determine the metrics you will use to evaluate the success of this campaign.

3. You work in public relations for an athletic department whose university is considered to be a "mid-major" program. The football team's quarterback is coming off a record-breaking season and the Athletic Director requests that you develop a social media campaign to promote the quarterback's Heisman candidacy. Design a social media campaign to fulfill this request and determine the metrics you will use to evaluate the success of this campaign.

Chapter 4

FROM HERO TO TRAITOR: THE CASE OF LEBRON JAMES

There was perhaps no bigger sports story in 2010 than the free-agency of

NBA superstar LeBron James. This story reached its dramatic conclusion on July

8, 2010, when James publicly revealed that he would leave the Cleveland

Cavaliers and join the Miami Heat. Prior to this announcement, there was intense

speculation about James' eventual destination and prognostication about where

James would ultimately end up extended well beyond the sports media universe.

Given the prominent coverage attached to this decision, it was not surprising that

James disclosed his intentions in an unprecedented manner. During a one-hour

interview with sports reporter Jim Gray, staged at a Connecticut Boys and Girls

Club, broadcast via ESPN entitled "The Decision," James announced his decision

to play for the Heat. This program drew almost 10 million viewers, becoming the

third most watched program on cable television to that point in the year, trailing

only the National Football League's (NFL) Pro Bowl, and an "ICarly" episode on

Nickelodeon (ESPN.com, 2010a).

As groundbreaking as this event was, perhaps more notable was the vitriol

James received from Cavaliers fans after his announcement. Cavalier fans took to

the streets of Cleveland and burned his jersey. These actions were exacerbated

when Cavaliers owner Dan Gilbert posted an entry on the team's website

mythically characterizing James as traitor who had sold out the team and fan base

(Kanalley, 2010). This missive read:

Dear Cleveland, All Of Northeast Ohio and Cleveland Cavaliers Supporters Wherever You May Be Tonight; As you now know, our former hero, who grew up in the very region that he deserted this evening, is no longer a Cleveland Cavalier.

This was announced with a several day, narcissistic, self-promotional build-up culminating with a national TV special of his "decision" unlike anything ever "witnessed" in the history of sports and probably the history of entertainment. Clearly, this is bitterly disappointing to all of us. The good news is that the ownership team and the rest of the hard-working, loyal, and driven staff over here at your hometown Cavaliers have not betrayed you nor NEVER will betray you.

There is so much more to tell you about the events of the recent past and our more than exciting future. Over the next several days and weeks, we will be communicating much of that to you. You simply don't deserve this kind of cowardly betrayal. You have given so much and deserve so much more. In the meantime, I want to make one statement to you tonight:

I PERSONALLY GUARANTEE THAT THE CLEVELAND CAVALIERS WILL WIN AN NBA CHAMPIONSHIP BEFORE THE SELF-TITLED FORMER 'KING' WINS ONE

You can take it to the bank. If you thought we were motivated before tonight to bring the hardware to Cleveland, I can tell you that this shameful display of selfishness and betrayal by one of our very own has shifted our "motivation" to previously unknown and previously never experienced levels. Some people think they should go to heaven but NOT have to die to get there. Sorry, but that's simply not how it works. This shocking act of disloyalty from our home grown "chosen one" sends the exact opposite lesson of what we would want our children to learn. And "who" we would want them to grow-up to become. But the good news is that this heartless and callous action can only serve as the antidote to the so-called "curse" on Cleveland, Ohio. The self-declared former "King" will be taking the "curse" with him down south. And until he does "right" by Cleveland and Ohio, James (and the town where he plays) will unfortunately own this dreaded spell and bad karma. Just watch.

Sleep well, Cleveland. Tomorrow is a new and much brighter day....
I PROMISE you that our energy, focus, capital, knowledge and experience will be directed at one thing and one thing only:
DELIVERING YOU the championship you have long deserved and is long overdue....

Dan Gilbert
Majority Owner
Cleveland Cavaliers

These appellations were echoed by press accounts of "The Decision." One of the more vivid was a FoxSports.com report with the headline "Benedict LeBron chooses treachery over honor" with a photograph of James in Revolutionary War attire captioned "Lebron's now biggest traitor since you-know-who" (Hench, 2010).

Although the demonstrable actions of burning James' jersey received significant press coverage, equally hostile and inflammatory action occurred via social media. Social media erupted as fans, celebrities, and journalists alike weighed in on James' exit. Social media provided outlets where fans could post messages directly to James (via his Facebook and Twitter accounts) and where fans could collectively make sense of what they perceived as an abandonment and betrayal (via discussion forums). The speculation and attention surrounding James' free agency was as unprecedented as the manner in which he delivered the news. The voluminous reaction to his decision to join the Heat provides a valuable opportunity to explore the concept of negative parasocial interaction (PSI). Given the intense responses that occurred after James' announcement, it seems that many Cavalier fans expected him to stay and be loyal to team (a perception that was magnified by James growing up in Cleveland vicinity). The expectation of loyalty and commitment seem likely to spawn negative behavior, in ways that would mimic a person's response to a transgression from an actual relational partner. Social media provides a convenient forum where fans can voice

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their feelings and make sense of an athlete's decision to voluntary leave a sports team.

Exploring responses to James' departure will shed important insights on how sports fans use social media to express negative PSI. Much of the PSI research in sports (Kassing & Sanderson, 2009a; 2009b; 2010a; Sanderson, 2008a) has discovered prosocial PSI expressions. While these studies have produced important information, it makes sense, given the intensity with which fans follow and invest in sports, to explore the "dark side" of PSI towards athletes. Some work has investigated this domain (see Sanderson, 2008b) but there remains a glaring need for more exploration which this case begins to undertake.

Literature Review

Parasocial Interaction

Parasocial interaction (PSI) describes how media users relate to and develop relationships with media figures (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Research suggests that PSI mirrors actual social relationships and that media users evaluate media figures in the same way they evaluate actual social partners (Giles, 2002). For instance, Rubin and McHugh (1987) found that social attraction to a media figure was a stronger predictor of PSI than physical attraction, and Cohen (2004) and Tsao (1996) argued that parasocial and actual social relationships required equivalent skill sets. Early PSI research focused on traditional mass media channels as scholars explored PSI with television newscasters (Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rayburn, 1980; Rubin & McHugh, 1987, Rubin, Perse, & Powell,

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1985); soap-opera characters (Perse & Rubin, 1989; Rubin & Perse, 1987); and radio and television talk-show hosts (Rubin, 2000; Rubin, Haridakis, & Eyal, 2003). While traditional media has laid the foundation for PSI research, with the advent of social media, audience members have convenient tools that allow them to be more overt in expressing PSI. These actions are further bolstered as celebrities increasingly use social media channels to regularly solicit fan participation.

As PSI grows increasingly overt, more diverse behaviors manifest. Gleich (1997) identified a behavioral dimension of PSI - emphatic interaction. This concept refers to the behavioral or affective responses from viewers and is characterized by displays such as verbally addressing the media figure and feeling embarrassed when they make a mistake. This manifests in other ways such as feeling sorry for media figures when they make mistakes, missing them when they are gone, looking forward to seeing them, seeking information about them, and advising and counseling them (Cohen, 2004; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985; Sanderson, 2008b; Sood & Rogers, 2000).

This behavioral collage also encompasses negative relational behaviors, yet these displays have a sparse presence in the literature. Sanderson (2008b) explored PSI expressed by fans on Boston Red Sox pitcher Curt Schilling's blog and found that one way PSI manifested was through negativity. This occurred as fans condemned Schilling for his candor, overt religious displays, and his Republican Party affiliation and support for United States President George W. Bush. For instance, some people informed Schilling that his public commentary

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(including his blogging) reflected "what's wrong with our country," and posited

that Schilling was "nothing but a media whore, have been forever and will

continue to be one." One person also declared:

> Curt you are a donkey!!! You love this publicity. The fact that you have a
> blog, call radio stations, and put your face in front of a camera every
> second possible shows how much of an attention seeker you are….The
> announcer is an idiot, but then again so are you! (p. 350).

Still others derided Schilling for his overt religious displays, "The Lord

didn't help you pitch in a baseball game. The doctor and your talent did. Take

credit for your accomplishment. I doubt Jesus is a baseball fan," "By the way, my

Lord doesn't concern himself with how well you are pitching. Even against the

Yankees. He has violence against man and the earth to worry about." Another

person more elaborately stated:

> Reporters roll their eyes at your faith? Maybe because you are hypocritical
> in your bashing of others and your judging and bitching. You also shove it
> down people's throats, just as you do your politics. Not everyone feels the
> need to wear their religion on their sleeve. When the Red Sox won the
> World Series in 2004, (yes thanks to your heroics which you deserve a
> permanent place in every Red Sox fan's heart for, and that of many others
> on the team too), you couldn't wait to pollute my voicemail with your
> political hucksterism. PLEASE spare me the whining!!!! Just try to ask
> yourself when you are tempted to bash others or blow off your mouth and
> offend others who don't necessarily all think like you do: What would
> Jesus do? I believe in Him too, and I seriously doubt he would act like
> you. You are so self righteous and holier than thou (p. 351).

Some individuals were offended by Schilling's political views and expressed their

disdain through commentary such as, "Hey Curt, if you care so much about

'integrity,' then why in God's name are you a Republican?" "You were eager to

endorse Bush back in 2004, so how about you share with us your Iraq strategy?"

One person suggested that Schilling's support for Bush made him implicitly accountable for the consequences of the Iraq War:

> You've got the blood of 3373 (and counting) decent, dead American soldiers on your hands through your shilling for George Bush and Dick Cheney and their useless war. These deaths, and those of tens of thousands of other innocents in this war are what you should be talking about, not some silly news report about a bloody sock. Shame on you. Have some integrity and Christian decency admit you made a mistake. Gary Thorne sure did. Apologize to the families who suffer their loss quietly. Jesus will forgive you (p. 351).

In this particular case, fans criticized Schilling for various behaviors that they were offended by, perhaps because they perceived that these actions reflected negatively upon them. While fans have always had disagreement with athletes, social media provides a convenient forum where these critiques can be voiced directly to the athlete, often in ways that are hostile and disconcerting. For instance, on August 10, 2011, New York Giants wide receiver Steve Smith posted a message on his Facebook page after he signed with the Philadelphia Eagles. Smith's post revealed that his decision to the leave the franchise had been difficult and he thanked Giants fans for their support. This post drew 5, 335 comments, some of which included: "ur terrible i hate u u were my favorite receiver on the g-men now i hate u go get hurt again in philly" and "you're an idiot i hate you, hope you have a career ending injury, we wont miss you."

Smith responded by posting a message the following day that stated in part, "Instead of cursing at me and wishing my family and my knee harm, i wish you could understand that i truly wanted to stay here but the Giants DIDN'T want me here unfortunately." Such reactions from fans suggest a strong connection, or

identification with sports teams. When athletes engage in action that threatens the vitality of the team, fans respond aggressively, perceiving such actions as personal affronts that reflect poorly upon them. Identification holds a strong grasp on fan behavior and offers an important source of social standing for sports fans, thus, when they believe their identity has been compromised, strong reactions follow.

Sports Fans and Identification

Identification occurs when a media user perceives that they share similarities with a celebrity (Fraser & Brown, 2002, Soukup, 2006). For sports fans, these bonds occur with athletes, sports figures (e.g., coaches, broadcasters), sports teams, and even sporting venues (Trujillo & Krizek, 1994; Wann, 2006a; Wann & Branscombe, 1993), and sports fandom is an integral social identity component (Wann, Royalty, & Roberts, 2000). As identification blossoms, fans increasingly correlate their self-esteem and social identity with athletes' and sports teams' performances. This association is characterized by fans using terminology such as "we" and "my" when describing athletic performances (Cialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman, & Sloan, 1976; Sanderson, 2008b). Not surprisingly, when athletes and teams are successful, fans more overtly express their identification with "winners," whereas they invoke distance when athletes and teams are unsuccessful (Partridge, Wann, & Elison, 2010).

Identification engenders prosocial outcomes such as increasing interpersonal connections, enhancing social life satisfaction, and reducing loneliness and alienation (Wann, 2006b), but also prompts maladaptive behaviors

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(Wakefield & Wann, 2006). In some cases, identification becomes so intense that some fans are willing to engage in hostile and criminal acts towards opposing teams and players to provide their identified team with a competitive advantage (Wann, Culver, Akanda, Daglar, De Divitiis, & Smith, 2005). Highly identified fans also are more likely to be verbally abusive towards opposing fans and referees during sporting events and to feel the need to consume alcohol at sporting events (Gibson, Willming, & Holdnak, 2002; Wakefield & Wann, 2006). Wakefield and Wann (2006) observed that highly identified fans have a greater propensity to enact dysfunctional behaviors at sporting events and are heavy consumers of sports media formats that promote confrontation (e.g., talk-radio).

While sports talk-radio, athletic contests, and pep rallies are popular contexts where fandom is traditionally displayed, social media sites are emerging as forums for these expressions as well. Fans use these sites to engage in sports conversation with other fans, athletes, sports reporters, and sports figures (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011).

Social Media Sites and Sports Fans

Social media sites have become immensely popular in a very short period of time. Social media are "architected by design to readily support participation, peer-to-peer conversation, collaboration and community" (Meraz, 2009, p. 682), and are characterized by:

> activities, practices, and behaviors among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions using conversational media…Web-based applications that make it possible to create and easily transmit content in the form of words, pictures, videos, and audios (Safko & Brake, 2009, p. 6).

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Sports fans have flocked to social media sites to build community and promote preferred representations of athletes and sports figures. Wilson (2007) analyzed an Internet discussion board devoted to the United States' Major League Soccer (MLS) organization and discovered that virtual communities formed around franchises lacking strong identities. Community building was facilitated by the interactive features of the discussion board that enabled fans to engage in meaningful discussions about professional soccer's struggle to gain mainstream acceptance in the United States. Similarly, Ferriter (2009) examined fan narratives posted on retired NFL players' *Wikipedia* pages and found that fans used these digital spaces to: (a) collectively celebrate and debate the athletes' achievements; and (b) construct representations of the athletes that fueled future interactions with other participants.

Although sports conversations on social media sites can be positive, they also incite conflict, mirroring characteristics of face-to-face (FtF) sports discussions (End, 2001; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010b). For example, on October 25, 2009, Kansas City Chiefs' running back Larry Johnson turned to Twitter to voice his displeasure with head coach Todd Haley. Some fans in turn started criticizing Johnson, which prompted him to respond with comments such as: "@[Lists Twitter ID] think bout a clever diss then wit ur fag pic. Christopher street boy. Is what us east coast cats call u." (Sanderson, 2011, p. 51). Similarly, in March, 2010, news reports surfaced reporting that Pittsburgh Steelers wide receiver Santonio Holmes had been accused of assaulting a woman in a Florida nightclub. Some fans were apparently upset by these reports and began directing

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criticism to Holmes for his alleged actions – via his Twitter account. On March 29, 2010, Holmes seemed to have had enough of these messages and tweeted to a fan, "y u tryna make me look like the bad guy. U shud try finding the worst thing that you could drink n kill urself." This message further exacerbated Holmes' volatile situation with the Steelers and the NFL (he was suspended for the first four games of the 2010-11 season for violating the league's substance abuse policy) and on April 11, 2010, Holmes was traded to the New York Jets.

The digital access that social media provides to athletes can be used in both positive and maladaptive ways. The latter was certainly on display when LeBron James elected to leave the Cavaliers for the Miami Heat.

Method

Data Collection

Data were obtained from fan responses to a story reporting James' decision and departure on the Cleveland.com website. Cleveland.com is the online home for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (Ohio's largest newspaper) and provides an abundance of information relating to the Cleveland area. On July 8, 2010, Michael Scott of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* posted a story entitled, "Cleveland-Akron fans saddened, sickened, and angry at LeBron James' decision to leave Cavaliers." There were a total of 265 comments posted to this story, and all postings were selected for data analysis. Postings spanned 5 days, 15 hours, and 14 minutes.

Data Analysis

To determine the ways that negative parasocial interaction was expressed towards LeBron James, a thematic analysis, using constant comparative methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was conducted. Each posting served as the unit of analysis. Each posting was initially read to gain a sense of sense how this type of parasocial interaction manifested. During this process, postings that did not contain messages meaningful to the study (e.g., commentary directed at other posters were excluded from analysis, $n = 64$). This left 201 postings available for analysis.

The postings were then micro-analyzed and classified into emergent categories based on the ways that negative parasocial interaction was occurring. After the initial categorization of data, the author returned to the data to gain insight into the usefulness of developed categories (Suter, Bergen, Daas, & Durham, 2006). Themes were summarized and compared to ascertain similarity, and the author compared and reduced themes as much as possible while still preserving meaning. Through this process, development, clarification, and enhancement of categories continued until new observations failed to add significantly to existing categories. Additionally, due to the interpretative nature of data analysis, overlap between categories existed and the author allowed for the chance that several themes could be evident in a single posting. Analysis revealed that negative parasocial interaction manifested in the following ways: (a) character attacks; (b) insecurity allegations; (c) betrayal; and (d) eradication.

<center>**Results and Interpretation**</center>

To indicate where a wall posting fell in the data set, a number is attached

to each exemplar. For example, a posting with the number (100) indicates the

100th posting in the data set. Postings are reported verbatim from the data, spelling

and grammatical errors were left intact.

Character Attacks

A number of people attributed James' decision to leave Cleveland to

personal shortcomings that manifested his true character, which apparently he had

masked while playing Cleveland. Not surprisingly, given the media attention

surrounding James' "Decision" broadcast, participants frequently criticized James

for conceitedness. James was labeled as "cowardly and narcissistic" (11); "an

unprecedented narcissist who showed a shameful display of selfishness and

betrayal" (182); "a self-absorbed 25 year old 'kid' who has a ton of talent but no

honor" (187); and "a 'narcissistic – self centered – arrogant – sorry specimen'"

(242). Another person shared that "LeBron screwed it up, just like the rest of

America is 'screwing it up.' Selfish greedy decisions made by people without true

self-esteem, void of character and integrity" (25); while one parent disclosed how

she/he used James' behavior as a teaching moment:

> At dinner tonight, my 9 year old son asked what I thought 'the decision'
> was going to be. I told him I had listened to ESPN radio all day and 'they'
> were saying Lebron was going to Miami. His response...'Dad, isn't that
> being a quitter?' I responded, well, 'they' are saying that Lebron is doing
> it because he wants to win. My son responded, 'Dad, isn't that being a
> selfish poor sport?' My response was yes but it's not about honor, loyalty,
> sportsmanship or love of the game in pro sports, it's about money - it's
> business. He didn't have a response . . . This guy was an idol to a

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generation in this town. . . Lebron, hope you have fun drinking Vitamin Water as the king of South Beach! (95).

For others, James' behavior was a manifestation of deceit, and they challenged James' public statements that his decision to play for the Heat was rooted in a desire to win. For instance, "Plus he lied to everyone in American when he said that it was all about winning championships. Every NBA analyst I've read or listened to agreed that Chicago was his best chance at winning now and in the future" (72); "HE LIED TO US ALL…..HE MAY BE A GREAT BASKETBALL PLAYER, BUT HE REALLY SHOWED ME, AND ALL OF CLEVELAND WHAT HE IS AS A HUMAN BEING, A LIAR: (153); and "lebron is a liar, if he wanted to win multiple championships he would have went to the Bulls." (75).

James also was considered to be lacking in class and dignity. One person branded James as "classless, completely classless" (86); while another declared, "What a disgrace he is to himself, his family and Northeast Ohio" (133). One fan postulated that James' lack of class was a result of his upbringing:

> HE IS A TRANSIENT who roamed from roamed from place to place getting dragged around by his Mother Gloria….She admitted this in just about every interview about LeBUM and his upbringing (208).

For these individuals, James' departure to the Heat and the manner in which he handled his free-agency brought his true character to the forefront. Apparently, these characteristics were unknown or conveniently ignored until James decided to leave the team. Cavalier fans clearly had strong reactions when James left for the Heat, as evidenced by the protests and jersey burnings that

commenced after he made his announcement, an indicator of the impending hit

coming to their social identity as Cavalier fans. Accordingly, it was necessary to

frame James actions as driven in greed, ego, hypocrisy, and lack of class to

mitigate the perception that James left because he did not consider winning a

championship to be possible in Cleveland. In addition to character attacks, some

people contended that James' decision evidenced his lack of leadership – or put

another way, his inability to be the key figure in leading a team to a

championship.

Insecurity Allegations

James' decision to join an NBA with a proven superstar (Dwyane Wade)

precipitated a barrage of comments declaring that James lacked requisite mental

toughness that characterized other great NBA players such as Michael Jordan and

Kobe Bryant. One person declared, "Let's face it, he has some talent…can get a

team to the play-offs with reasonably talented teammates, but he CHOKES under

pressure" (60). Others chimed in with, "He has shown that although he has

tremendous basketball skills, he is lacking championship levels of courage,

character, and most importantly, leadership" (181); and "If this guy wanted a

championship 'so badly' he could have stayed in the game in Game 5. Take that

LeBron" (183).

Some participants argued that James was incapable of leading a team to a

championship by himself and needed the help of other superstars, "The Chosen

'one' knows he can't win even one without someone holding his hand" (59);

"True champions bring championships home, they don't go running around

looking for someone else to deliver it. Now he is Wade's little sister – and always

will be" (112); "LeBron was not good enough to carry your franchise when he

had adequate talent around him. Thats why he needs Wade and Bosh so he might

get some rings" (145); and "LeBron will never be The Man, he had to go to

another man's team (D. Wade) team to try and get a ring"

Several people claimed James had quit during games and as such, he

lacked the requisite passion that other great players possessed. One person

observed that James was "one spoiled athlete who has shown himself to be the

ultimate front-runner who quits and throws a tantrum in a playoff game when he

disagrees with the play-calling" (40). Another person remarked:

> A poor workman always blames his tools. James was very close to
> winning a championship but quit trying. He better hope his new
> surroundings will cover better when he quits again. Basketball is a team
> game and every team member needs to go all out!! Sorry he is going but
> he won't be a champ until he really stops quitting (195).

For another individual, James' departure meant, "we can now focus on team

basketball and running a real offense that doesnt consist of one guy dribbling for

20 seconds and then pulling up for 20 foot off balance jumper as the shot clock

expires" (189). Another person conveyed, "And without lbj ballhogging it when

the game is on the line with every single defender on him and all his teammates

standing there doing a guess what? maybe we might sink those shots" (4).

James' departure fueled what appeared to be suppressed frustrations with

James athletic capabilities (both physically and mentally). It appears, just as with

the alleged character flaws, that these traits were permissible until James left the

team. Fans were willing to tolerate shortcoming until James engaged in action that

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was unforgivable. It also became necessary to broadcast these deficiencies to lessen the stigma associated with James leaving the team. For these individuals, James was incapable of leading a team without assistance from other superstars, a sign of mental weakness that had always been present, but conveniently ignored. Emphasizing James' personal and professional shortcoming, paved the way for participants to declare that James had abandoned the fans - becoming a vivid exemplar of treason.

Betrayal

During his time in Cleveland, James had been given the moniker "King James" and fans incorporated this narrative to voice how James had abdicated his throne and become the pinnacle of disloyalty. For instance, "Well, he proved he wasn't the 'King'; he is 'Judas' (104); "Now the 'King' has abandoned his kingdom, his loyal fans, his hometown, his legacy to play second fiddle" (108); and "The self-proclaimed 'King' northeast Ohio crowned chose money, glamor, and fame over home, family and honor" (139). These sentiments were poignantly encapsulated by another person who elaborately noted:

> Let's hear it for Royalty ladies and gentlemen. They can suck what they want out of it's commoner's and dictate(orship)their future; at the expense of the foundation created for such a King. He is not the only King of past or present, but of significance to Ohio and Kingdon of Cleveland. The other Kings reign in other parts as well and cast their respective power where ever it's Monarch sees fit. I thought Kings were humble to it's followers and reigned over the needs of such. The new age Monarchy is sanctimonious and greedy in a unanimous fashion but we continue to support them and the others as if they were deities! (184).

For others, Lebron had "cowardly betrayed and disrespected Cleveland, a city that loved him" (81); and "I call Him the Betrayer of all Betrayers, a Bin

Ladin of all sports, a Wimp who is scared to be a man" (259). Another fan noted

that James had historically shown no loyalty to Cleveland, "Here is a guy who

four years ago wore a Yankees hat to an Indians-Yankees playoff game. He

showed then that he had no loyalty to the city and to the fans of Cleveland" (227).

For these participants, James seemed to have everything he needed to be

content, an adoring fan base in an area where had grown up, yet he nonetheless

abdicated his throne and betrayed them. Betrayal results when one person in a

relationship is unfaithful to a relational expectation (Feldman, Cauffman, Jensen,

& Arnett, 2000). While there were myriad rumors of James' ultimate playing

destination, for many Cavalier fans, there was an expectation that James would

return, and when he deviated from this expectation, they were clearly jilted. These

feelings are symptomatic of betrayal in actual social relationships as victims of

betrayal experience unpleasant emotional responses (McCormack & Levine 1990;

Metts, 1994). Betrayal can result in relational termination (Duck, 1994) and this

occurred with many participants as they voiced their desire to relinquish all

connections to James.

Eradication

For some, James' departure was so severe that they declared they would

have nothing more to do with him. There were those who called on others to join

them in their decision, "BOYCOTT LEBRON PRODCUTS" (8); "If Cavs fans

truly want to get back at LeBron they will boycott going to the game when Miami

plays there" (50) ; and "go to nike.com and tell them you wont buy their products

as long as they are associted with Judas James!!" (250). Others described the

physical steps they were taking to erase James' memory. Examples included, "I will be throwing away the most valuable LeBron 'T' shirt I purchased not too long ago" (152); "i burt my lebron jersey and his 100 $ shoes too" (186); and "I will never ever use his name again" (259).

Taking physical steps to remove James from memory and encouraging others to join them in these pursuits was insufficient for other participants. Their desire to eradicate James was so intense, that they wished future failure upon him. For some people this was related to playing, "i hope he rots and never wins anything more" (53); "I sincerely hope you and your new all-star team fail miserably" (239); and "I HOPE HE NEVER WINS A TITLE ANYWHERE" (153). Yet for others, these hopes extended to James' physical health and well-being, "Good Luck in Miami No Ring James, break a leg…….No really, Break a Leg!" (220); and "he can go die for all i care" (186).

The desire to purge James from their memory demonstrates how intense the bonds these individuals felt with James. His perceived betrayal was so profound that the only alternative was to completely remove his memory, although others exacerbated these feelings by wishing failure and harm upon James in his future endeavors. These sentiments are not uncommon when actual social relationships end. Buchanan, O'Hair, and Becker (2006) noted that when relationships terminate, non-initiators deploy anti-social messages intended to punish the initiator. They noted that these messages often are socially unacceptable and serve no constructive purpose. These statements certainly fall within those parameters, yet messages such as these are prevalent in sports and

reflect the problematic nature of a fan being intensely invested in sports teams and athletes. There is an argument to be made that James could have handled his free-agency process differently (which James has also acknowledged) but to wish death and physical harm upon an athlete is troubling, yet has been observed in prior research on fan behavior (Wann, Culver, Akanda, Dagler, De Divitiis, & Smith, 2005).

Discussion

Social media has provided fans with unprecedented access to athletes and sports figures. Although much of this interaction is positive, as this case demonstrates, fans will aggressively condemn athletes via these channels, particularly when the athlete or sports figure commits a perceived transgression. Thus, just as interaction between actual relational partners is marked by both positive and negative behavior, so too is parasocial interaction. This case extends previous work on negative parasocial interaction (Sanderson, 2008b) and suggests that when athletes willingly leave a sports team, fans with a strong social identity investment in a team respond by disparaging the athlete and in this case, quickly turn on their former hero. This case offers some other implications that are now discussed.

First, there is a clear connection between social identity and athletes. Although not part of this case, there were several participants who criticized Cavalier fans by mocking Cleveland. Several examples included: "flat keg beer, blizzards in june, ugly pale fat women, unemployment, poverty, dumbness, irrelevance, below mediocrity, and high expectancy of suicide, is what you people

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have to live with. Cleve-LAND = LOSERS!" and "James was all your poor city had, now he's gone and you have nothing. The Cavs will now suck, the Browns are a laughing stock that should be flushed down the toilet, the Indians are a joke." These types of comments prompted strong reactions from Cleveland fans, such as, "I guess posting on Cleveland area blogs is a diversion from living alone in your mom's basement, surfing port at night" while another fan posted foreclosure statistics for Dade County Florida (where Miami is located). The success that James brought the Cavaliers extended to the geographic area as well. In other words, the Cavaliers success strengthened the region's vitality, a positive beacon to offset the darkness of economic recession. Accordingly, when James left, fans perceived that action to reflect on the region personally. With no apparent replacement for James, the Cavaliers were poised to return to mediocrity, further delegitimizing the social identity of the Cleveland area.

Second, the negative commentary directed towards James is symptomatic of other vitriolic communication that fans express towards athletes and sports figures via social media sites. One potential explanation for the prominence of this behavior lies in a derivative of Walther's (1996) hyperpersonal model of communication. This model posits that communication via CMC is more socially desirable than that which occurs via FtF. This outcome is partially attributable to the lack of visual cues and a communicator's ability to selectively self-present (Walther, 1996). Given these features, people have a tendency to exaggerate their behavior when using CMC (Pena, Walther, & Hancock, 2007). While much research has explored how these features elicit positive outcomes, there is a need

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to look at how these attributes promote negative communication in digital spheres. Communication between fans and athletes is an ideal place for such exploration. Fans display problematic behaviors at sporting events (Palmer & Thompson, 2007; Wakefield & Wann, 2006) and as this case demonstrates these actions extend into CMC and are perhaps more amplified.

Third, this case demonstrates that interaction between sports fans and athletes is turbulent. That is, when the athlete is performing according to expectations, fans are likely to be supportive, but when the athlete deviates from expected behavior, fans freely criticize and lambaste the athlete. It is not surprising that hostile reactions result when a player willingly leaves a team, but it will be important to examine other circumstances when sports fans express negative behavior towards athletes. Sports offer plenty of opportunity for those looking to explore this phenomenon further.

Shortly after the public announcement of the death of Osama bin Laden, Pittsburgh Steelers running back Rashard Mendenhall posted several messages on Twitter cautioning people about celebrating bin Laden's death and that only one side of the story was being presented. Steelers fans posted a host of messages on the team's Facebook page lambasting Mendenhall, and although Mendenhall remained on the team, Steelers fans may no longer view Mendenhall as "one of them." A similar example occurred after the Boston Red Sox missed the 2011 MLB playoffs after holding a sizeable lead in the wild card standings. Shortly after the Red Sox were eliminated, reports surfaced that pitchers Josh Beckett, Jon Lester, and John Lackey had been drinking beer, eating fried chicken, and playing

video games in the clubhouse during games. These reports enflamed the disappointment Red Sox fans already felt at missing the playoffs, and fans voiced strong reactions via social media.

Social media offers abundant opportunities for researchers to investigate the shifting nature of parasocial interaction between sports fans and athletes. Some transgressions may be so severe that fans never allow the athlete back into their good graces, yet "time heals all wounds" and as time moves on, fans may incrementally return to supporting the athlete. This potential was not lost on Lebron James. On February 16, 2012, while preparing to play the Cavaliers, James disclosed to reporters that he could see himself returning to play for the Cavaliers someday (Associated Press, 2012). Reaction to these comments was considerable and James quickly reassured Heat fans they had nothing to worry about. Nevertheless, social media exploded with fan reactions, offering further evidence that social media are the predominant place for sports discussions (Sanderson, 2011).

Discussion Questions:

1. Social identity is one explanation for negative fan behavior. What other explanations might exist?

2. Is it problematic that fans do not voice concerns about a player's character or athletic performance until the player has violated fans expectations?

3. Is it reasonable for fans to expect a player to stay with the team for their whole career? Why or Why Not? Is it appropriate for fans to express their disappointment with athletes who willingly leave franchises?

4.   How do social media make expressing parasocial interaction easier?

5.   How should athletes and sports teams respond when fans express critical comments via social media?

6.   Is it possible that some fans comments via social media could be perceived as threatening? Would it be helpful for law enforcement personnel to monitor social media when athletes announce that they are willingly leaving a team?

Activities

1.   You are a sports agent who represents a prominent athlete. The athlete has been with one team for his/her entire career. The athlete's contract is up and the athlete expresses to you that he/she wishes to leave for another team. How would you advise the athlete to communicate this message to minimize negative reaction from the fans of his/her current team?

2.   You and your group work as social media consultants. You are contracted by a local college who is concerned about student behavior they have witnessed on social media. They request that you come up with a program that will be presented to students to promote positive behavior on social media sites. Design a training program to meet this request.

Chapter 5

SOCIAL MEDIA AND IMAGE REPAIR: THE CASE OF TIGER WOODS

Professional golfer Tiger Woods is arguably the most recognizable and popular athlete in the world. Since joining the Professional Golfers Association (PGA) in 1996, Woods has enjoyed tremendous success, winning 95 tournaments, including 71 PGA events (Tigerwoods.com, 2010). In 2001, Woods became the first golfer in history to hold all four major PGA championships (Masters, U.S. Open, British Open, and PGA Championship) concurrently. Woods also is the leader in career victories amongst active golfers and currently third on the all-time victory list. As a result of this success, Woods is the PGA's all-time earnings leader, having amassed $111,433,044 (USD) (Tigerswoods.com, 2010). These achievements netted Woods lucrative endorsement deals with corporations such as Nike, Gatorade, Gillette, and Electronic Arts, providing revenue that far exceeds his golf winnings (Tigerwoods.com, 2010). Given his tremendous marketability and earning power, it was not surprising in 2009 when Woods became the first professional athlete to accumulate career earnings of one billion dollars (USD) (ESPN.com, 2009).

Both Woods' athletic success and his corporate sponsorships made him a very profitable "brand," which required a strategically constructed and intensely managed public persona (Hutchinson, 2010). Indeed, Woods was widely considered to have a squeaky-clean public image, one that was free from scandals and problematic behaviors that at times, beset other professional athletes (McShane, 2009). Thus, Woods was frequently framed in the media to exemplify

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the "consummate professional," one who consistently performed under pressure –

a highly desirable character trait (Surowiecki, 2009). Woods was "riding high,"

enjoying exceptional career success and vast public popularity, standing on what

appeared to be the pinnacle of personal and professional success – that is, until

November 27, 2009. On that date, an early-morning car accident sparked a flurry

of events that dramatically altered Woods' public image.

On November 27, 2009, news broke that Woods had been injured in a

single-car automobile accident leaving his home. Later that day, reports began to

surface that Woods' wife, Elin, had used a golf club to break one of the vehicle's

windows, causing law enforcement to be called to the scene (ESPN.com, 2010b).

These reports ignited speculation that there was more substance behind the

accident, yet public details remained scarce, prompting sports columnists to

declare that Woods needed to provide a public explanation (Davis, Lucas, &

McShane, 2010; Lupica, 2010). Nevertheless, Woods remained silent, and

speculation soon emerged that his marriage was experiencing trouble. On

December 2, 2009, the first of many allegations about Woods' marital infidelity

was launched. Jaimee Grubbs, a former cocktail waitress, revealed that she had a

31-month affair with Woods. In response, Woods issued a written statement

indicating that "I have let my family down, and I regret those transgressions with

all my heart" (ESPN.com, 2010b). By February, 2010, the number of women

contending that they had affairs with Woods grew to approximately fourteen.

Amidst these growing and often lurid reports, Woods held a 13 minute, publicly

televised press conference on February 19, 2010, wherein he apologized for his

actions and requested privacy while he dealt with these issues (Roberts, Epstein, & McShane, 2010).

Woods' fall from grace was quite precipitous and warranted image repair to be undertaken. One avenue Woods utilized to enact image repair was to begin posting to his dormant Twitter account in December, 2009. Woods is certainly not the first athlete to incur damage to his persona thereby requiring image repair. What makes his situation unique is that he turned to a social media platform to complement his image repair efforts (e.g., press conference with public apology). With the control over messages that social media provides, these media tools are imperative for athletes to employ when enacting image repair (Sanderson, 2011).

In transmitting messages via social media, athletes communicate outward evidence of an inward change, inspiration that prompts follower to identify with them. Whereas critical press coverage of athlete's actions is perhaps a natural consequence of their actions, social media offers athletes a space to distribute positivity. Such capability may significantly enhance an athlete's ability to rebuild their public image and facilitate support from fans as they move forward. Certainly athletes are not immune from consequences, yet social media is a strategic tool that enables them to publicize their efforts to mitigate wrongdoing. Thus, when their public profile is damaged, social media becomes a conduit for them to enact image repair in a visible forum where fans can witness their rehabilitation. Additionally, although detractors may appear, supportive fans can contend with these critics and drive them from the forum.

Literature Review

Image Repair

Image is an important social commodity, and when threatened, communicative messages can be crafted to repair damage (Benoit, 2006). Benoit (1995, 2006) categorized 14 image repair strategies under five classifications: (a) denial; (b) evade responsibility; (c) reducing offensiveness; (d) corrective action; and (e) mortification. Denial is based on two variants, simple denial, stating one did not perform the negative act, and shifting blame, indicating another performed the negative act. Evading responsibility involves four possible outcomes: (a) provocation - responding to another's act; (b) defeasibility - indicating a lack of information or ability; (c) accident - suggesting the negative act was unintentional; and (d) good intentions – stating that the negative act was grounded in well-meaning thought. Reducing offensiveness is comprised of six variants: (a) bolstering - stressing the accused's positive attributes; (b) minimization - suggesting the act is less than harmful than indicated; (c) differentiation - suggesting the act is less damaging than similar acts; (d) transcendence - arguing the act is offset by a greater good that is accomplished; (e) attack accuser - attempts made to reduce the accuser's credibility; and (f) compensation - reimbursing victims. Both the corrective action and mortification strategies are designed to prevent reoccurrence and obtain public forgiveness.

Much research has examined image restoration from organizations (Cowden & Sellnow, 2002; Hindman, 2005; Metzler 2001) and celebrities (Anderson, 2002; Benoit, 1997; Benoit & Hanczor, 1994; Benoit & McHale,

2001). Benoit (1997) argued that entertainment celebrities' image repair strategies differed from political figures image repair efforts in that entertainment celebrities are not likely to experience criticism from fellow actors, have their peers initiate attacks against them, and their transgressions do not have far-reaching ramifications. Benoit (1997) further suggested that entertainment celebrities' image repair efforts differed from corporate image repair in that: (a) it is difficult for celebrities to distance themselves from their personal acts, (b) entertainment celebrities are not likely to experience attacks from their peers, and (c) considering their personal transgressions do not have a far reaching impact, celebrities are less likely to engage in mortification strategies.

Despite the prevalence of image repair research centered on celebrities, athletes' image repair has received little scholarly attention. Benoit and Hanczor (1994) analyzed amateur figure skater Tonya Harding's image repair efforts during a television interview after she was accused of conspiring to physically injure Nancy Kerrigan, one of her competitors. They discovered Harding used bolstering, denial, and attack accuser strategies, and concluded that Harding failed to develop these strategies effectively and did not portray herself in a manner congruent with audience perceptions. Sanderson (2008c) explored MLB pitcher Roger Clemens' image repair strategies during a press conference he held to discuss allegations that he used performance enhancing drug (PEDs). Sanderson observed that Clemens' image repair was ineffective as his attorney overtook the press conference and Clemens abruptly ended the press conference although he promised to answer all questions submitted to him.

Clemens' case illuminates why social media is an optimal venue for athletes. That is, athletes maintain control over messages and can strategically engage those who wish to participate. Confrontations have certainly occurred between athletes and journalists over social media, but athletes have more control over which journalists they will engage, whereas in a press conference, this is often dictated by others. Additionally, social media enables them to promote important aspects of their identity that can bolster their standing with the public and as such, social media enables athletes to optimize their identity presentations.

Twitter and Identity

Twitter is one of the most popular social media platforms at the present time. Twitter has experienced immense growth and is seen as an important resource for breaking immediate news and assessing public opinion (Gilbertson, 2009; O'Connor, Balasubramanyan, Routledge, & Smith, 2010) and this has certainly occurred with athletes (Sanderson, 2011; Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). Athletes are arguably the most prominent celebrity group that has adopted Twitter and researchers have explored how the Twitter is influencing sport (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010a; Sanderson & Kassing, 2011; Schultz & Sheffer, 2010; Sheffer & Shultz, 2010).

Identity is a construct that consists of both internal and relational factors, and fluctuates as messages are exchanged between people (Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 2003). The communication theory of identity (CTI) (Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 2003) posits that identity is formed, maintained, transformed, and expressed through communication. CTI suggests that identity is composed of four

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inter-connected layers: (a) personal; (b) enacted; (c) relational; and (d) communal (Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 2003). The personal component is shaped by one's self-concept and is influenced by messages received from others. The enacted frame occurs when identity is manifested directly or indirectly through social roles and cues. The relational aspect details how identities take shape with respect to one's interaction and negotiation with relational partners. The communal component results from collective memories and associations from a social network (Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 2003).

CMC broadly and social media specifically have significantly influenced identity expression (Kapidzic & Herring, 2011; Walther, Liang, DeAndrea, Tong, Carr, Sppotswood, & Amichai-Hamburger, 2011). For instance, consider Walther's (1996) contention that CMC enables people to engage in selective self-presentation (Walther & Burgoon, 1992). This capability optimizes communicators' relational possibilities as they strategically self-present, benefiting from the lack of social cues that can stigmatize the ways others perceive them and highlighting aspects of their identity that they feel are minimized in face-to-face contexts (Kim & Papacharissi, 2002). Additionally, Niven and Zilber (2001) examined U.S. Congressional members' websites and discovered that female congressional members' self-presentation countered commonly held voter stereotypes that women are not active participants in the U.S. political arena.

The capability to broadcast preferred aspects of one' identity has only intensified with the proliferation of social media applications. Social media offers

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individuals autonomy over how to present and promote their identity. On Facebook, Grasmuck, Martin, and Zhao (2009) examined 83 Facebook profiles belonging to individuals in minority groups and discovered that through their Facebook profiles, these people resisted racial silencing and challenged assumptions of a "color-blind" society. Although social media increases control over identity expression, there is a downside. Walther, Van Der Heide, Hamel, and Shulman (2009) tested the warranting principle (the notion that judgments about a target are based more heavily on information that targets cannot manipulate rather than self-descriptions) using mock Facebook profiles. They found that people's impression of the person in the mock Facebook profile was influenced more by comments of friends than self-description. Thus, one's friends may counter or override the identity a person expresses, prompting others to form impressions based on other-generated statements instead of self-generated statements.

Social Media and Athlete Identity

One of the more compelling outcomes social media offers athletes is the ability to counteract perceived negative media framing (Sanderson, 2011). Athletes often have their identity constructed and disseminated by sports reporters, frequently in ways that are unfavorable to them. For instance, former Boston Red Sox pitcher Curt Schilling is an active social media user and well-known for his candor. During his career, his blogging prompted reporters to label him as a "Beantown Blabbermouth" (Madden, 2007); as "stealing the spotlight" (Brewer, 2007b); and a "self-righteous pitcher" (Brewer, 2007a). Such framings

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promote perceptions that athletes who use social media are selfish, greedy, and

poor team players. Sports journalists then capitalize on these interpretations to

protect their relevance with sports media consumers. Interestingly, in Schilling's

case, blog readers were quite supportive and encouraged him to continue blogging

(Sanderson, 2010a). Sanderson (2008d) also examined how Schilling used his

blog to assert his identity as a sports media critic after a commentator questioned

his athletic integrity. Schilling offered statements such as:

> Instead of using the forums they participate in to do something truly different, change lives, inspire people, you have an entire subset of media whose sole purpose in life is to actually be the news, instead of report it (p. 921).

> If you haven't figured it out by now, working in the media is a pretty nice gig. Barring outright plagiarism or committing a crime, you don't have to be accountable if you don't want to. You can say what you want when you want and you don't really have to answer to anyone. You can always tell the bigger culprits by the fact you never see their faces in the clubhouse. Most of them are afraid to show themselves to the subjects they rail on everyday (p. 922).

Additionally, former MLB pitcher Roger Clemens used Twitter to respond to a

New York Daily News report that included derogatory comments by his ex-

mistress (Vinton, 2010).

Social media, then, enables athletes to simultaneously repair their image

and promote aspects of their identity that are most conducive to their image repair

efforts. This combination is a unique benefit that athletes can capitalize upon

when their public image takes a hit. In that vein, when Tiger Woods experienced

his rapid descent from grace, Twitter became a necessary conduit to engage in

image repair.

Method

Data Collection

Data were obtained from Tigers Woods' official Twitter account (@TigerWoods). Twitter is one of most popular social media forums at the present time. Twitter started in 2006 and has now grown to 462 million registered users, and is expected to hit 500 million users in by the 2nd quarter of 2012. At the present time, Twitter has 100 million active users (defined as accessing the account at least once per month) and is expected to hit 250 million active users by the end of 2012 (Bennett, 2012). Twitter is a micro-blogging site that allows users to create messages, termed "tweets," that are no more than 140 characters in length. One's Twitter account is linked to a username preceded by the @symbol. Twitter users become connected to one another by choosing to "follow" another Twitter user. Each tweet a person sends is transmitted to their "followers" who can reply to the tweet by adding their own commentary, or re-tweeting (re-transmitting) the message to that person's followers. Twitter has become the social media tool of choice for athletes and sports reporters (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010; Sanderson & Kassing, 2011; Schultz & Sheffer, 2010; Sheffer & Schultz, 2010).

Data Analysis

To analyze the ways that Woods used Twitter to repair his image, a thematic analysis, using constant comparative methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was conducted. All Woods' tweets were selected for analysis. At the time of analysis, Woods had 1,783,688 followers. Tweets spanned a time period of

June 26, 2009 – January 20, 2012. This yielded a total of 199 tweets. Each tweet

served as the unit of analysis. Each tweet was initially read to gain a sense how

image repair was being enacted. The tweets were then micro-analyzed and

classified into emergent categories based on the image repair function of the

tweet. After the initial categorization of data, the author returned to the data to

gain insight into the usefulness of developed categories (Suter, Bergen, Daas, &

Durham, 2006). Themes were summarized and compared to ascertain similarity,

and the author compared and reduced themes as much as possible while still

preserving meaning. Through this process, development, clarification, and

enhancement of categories continued until new observations failed to add

significantly to existing categories. Additionally, due to the interpretative nature

of data analysis, overlap between categories existed and the author allowed for the

chance that several themes could be evident in a single posting. Analysis revealed

that bolstering was the exclusive image repair strategy employed by Woods on

Twitter. This is not surprising given the nature of events that led to Woods' fall

from grace. That is, Woods needed to reconnect with fans and emphasize his

positive traits, rather than casting aspersions on others or blaming the media for

his troubles. Bolstering occurred in several different ways: (a) accessibility; (b)

benefactor; (c) committed athlete; and (d) displaying a diverse personality.

Results and Interpretation

To indicate where a tweet fell in the data set, a number is attached to each

exemplar. For example, a tweet with the number (15) indicates the 15th tweet in

the data set. Tweets are reported verbatim from the data, spelling and grammatical

errors were left intact. Many of the tweets were embedded with links to other places on the web. For ease of reading, the notation [link] has been inserted to denote where the link was located in the tweet, rather than providing the actual link.

Accessibility

A significant portion of Woods' tweets were devoted to answering questions from fans. As other research has noted (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011; Sanderson, 2011) this is an emerging social media trend and Woods encouraged fans to submit questions via Twitter, "Finished my workout, ready to answer some questions. Thanks for sending some good ones (14); "Going to answer some questions after my #ChevronWorldChallenge press conference on Wed. Start sending and I'll answer my favorites on video" (25); and "Fun rd at isleworth. I'll be answering your TW12 [Tiger Woods 2012 Video Game] questions this Wednesday, just use the @EASports_Tiger and I'll answer as many as I can" (136).

A number of fans took advantage of this opportunity, as Woods noted in one tweet, "After getting about 5,000 questions I posted my answers video on Facebook. Check it out: [link]" (24). Questions from fans ranged from golf-related questions, "Natural progression of golf, look at how ball has changed RT @RidetheKtrain should more be done to limit the impact of technology over skill" (6); to popular culture preferences, "Thriller there is no comparison. RT @TheFenney here's one they wont ask. Thriller or Billie Jean?" (105); to personal

likes, "Vanilla with rainbow sprinkles. RT: @daviddbubs44 What is your favorite ice cream?"

In addition to making himself accessible to his fans, Woods used Twitter to express his gratitude to fans for their support. Examples included, "Thanks brother RT @Squidbaittw I'm a retired Special Ops Guy like your dad. I got divorced and it was tough as hell. I have faith in you!" (179); "Really appreciate the fans and players support, great event" (164); and "Also, thanks for all the birthday wishes today. Happy new year and go Cardinal!" (18).

Benefactor

Given the frequency with which people solicited Woods for information, it was not surprising that Woods received requests for advice which he then granted. For instance, "Just keep getting better each and every year RT: @ConscienceWrite My son is a 3-time world champion at age 12, any advice on making AJGA" (151); "Anyway you can build muscle memory is a good thing RT @martin1126 @EASPORTS_Tiger can practicing on Wii improve or hurt my real swing?" (128); and "1 thing you learn at S: time mgt RT @PRodgersGolf I'm a freshman on the Stanford golf team. Whats your advice on getting to the next level." (5). Woods also promoted other individuals, which given the number of his Twitter followers, exposed these individuals to a vast audience. Examples included, "Great day hanging out with Liu Xiang in Beijing, really cool dude. Hope he does well in London games next year" (117); "Staying with Mark Steinberg. Total confidence in him. Excited about the next stage in my professional life. Fond memories of Mark McMorack" (55); and "Joe LaCava is

an outstanding caddie and I have known him since I was an amateur, really looking forward to having him on the bag" (33).

Committed Athlete

After reports of Woods' infidelity surfaced, his performance plummeted and what was once expected, consistent success on the PGA Tour, was replaced by disappointing finishes. Accordingly, it was imperative that Woods used Twitter to inform fans of his efforts to return to his winning ways. This included tweets about his excitement to play in events, "I've been working on my game, it's game time hooah!!" (153); "looking forward to the competition next week, just committed to the Players" (65); "Feeling fit and ready to tee it up at Firestone next week. Excited to get back out there!" (45); and "Looking forward to continuing that mo at the #ChevronWorldChallenge next week" (27). This also involved keeping fans apprised of his injury status, which was often accompanied with re-assurances that Woods was diligently working, "Minor injuries keeps me from playing Wells Fargo next week. Apologies to tourney & fans, but working hard to get healthy [link]" (114); and "Bummed that my left leg has me on the sidelines, but I want, and expect, to be at the US Open. Will do all I can to get there" (61).

Displaying a Diverse Personality

Through Twitter, Woods displayed his multi-faceted personality. This enabled him to diversely broadcast his persona, exposing fans to various aspects of his identity that they would be unlikely to observe via mass media broadcasts. Woods was, at times, very humorous in his tweets, and showed a side of his

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personality in sharp contrast to the stoic personality that is often displayed in the mass media. For example, "At least I was #1 pick back then, fo' shizzle RT: @lisp0wer What did you think when @davechappelle played you in the Racial Draft?" (144); "First win of the year, unfortunately it was against @jimmyfallon" (126); "Last time I missed a USGA event Salt n Peppa was still cool" (53); and "Wait, Salt N Peppa is still cool!!" (52).

Woods demonstrated his affinity for other sports, positioning himself as a sports connoisseur, whose interests extended well beyond golf. For instance, "Seeing a lot of questions about the Superbowl: I'm picking the Steelers, can't pull for Rodgers he's a CAL guy" (143); "Lakers will beat whoever is there. RT: @zoomie115 Who do you like in the NBA Finals?" (104); and "The Axe is back in Palo Alto where it belongs" (193). Woods also expressed popular cultural preferences through Tweets such as, "Hootie and the Blowfish for sure. RT @TheFunBoat Do you like Hootie better as a rock star or a country star?" (99); "Tupac, signing off until next time RT: @MichAlum08 Tupac or Biggie" (142); and "Absolutely, probably more! New Justice League Doom coming out soon too RT @slickg720 are you as pumped as me about the dark knight rises?" (3).

Woods' public image suffered a precipitous fall. In turning to Twitter, he was able to broadcast his positive traits to his fans. This was paramount for Woods, as mass-media coverage overwhelmingly centered on the salacious details of his extramarital affairs (Sanderson, 2010b). Had Woods solely relied on the mass media, it is unlikely that he would have been able to display the strategies he did on Twitter. For instance, Woods is often perceived as very stoic in his public

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commentary, and while there may be light moments during interactions with the press, Twitter enabled him to respond in humorous ways with fans, and to show more variation in his personality. These benefits are directly attributable to social media and further emphasize how important these channels are for athletes to use strategically (Sanderson, 2011) such as when it becomes necessary to enact image repair.

Discussion

There are a host of image repair strategies that can be called upon when an individual or organization sustains damage to their reputation. Given the long-term damage that can result when image is threatened, it is imperative that individuals and organizations select the appropriate response (Sanderson, 2008c). With respect to this outcome, social media provides a tremendous resource. That is, as audience members can participate by posting messages to social media content, athletes must utilize these responses in an effort to gauge how the public is responding to current image repair strategies. Based on this feedback, image repair strategies can be modified to generate more favorable public responses. Additionally, encouraging and inviting audience members' commentary via social media outsources image repair work to these individuals (Sanderson, 2010a). In other words, by reinforcing supportive commentary, these individuals will bolster image repair efforts by broadcasting positive commentary and censoring detractors.

Social media also enables athletes to supplement their image repair claims with photographic and video evidence that documents their efforts to get back in

the fans' good graces. Whereas critical press coverage is perhaps a natural consequence of athlete's behaviors, social media offers a space to counteract negative press coverage and distribute preferred presentations (Sanderson, 2008d). This capability significantly enhances an athlete's ability to rebuild their public image and facilitate support from fans as they move forward. Certainly, athletes should not be immune from consequences, but social media is a strategic tool that enables them to publicize their efforts to mitigate wrongdoing. This is crucial as an athlete's public image plays a role in their ability to obtain endorsements. Accordingly, when their public profile is damaged, social media is a conduit for athletes to enact image repair in a visible forum where both fans and potential sponsors can witness their rehabilitation.

Social media also allows athletes to promote a multi-faceted identity to fans. In sharing more aspects of their identity with their followers, athletes open up additional avenues for fans to identify with them (e.g., popular culture). Previous research suggests that some people become so absorbed in media programming that they mentally transport themselves into media narratives (Dal Cin, Zanna, & Fong, 2004; Green & Brock, 2000) and that parasocial interaction is more likely when people like the character (Tian & Hoffner, 2010). These scholarly strands merge together in important ways when athletes perform image repair. These disclosures can stimulate more parasocial interaction with fans and in providing these additional points of connection, fans may respond by defending the athlete and supporting their efforts to rehabilitate their image.

Closeness and liking then prompts fans to rally and support athletes by injecting themselves into media narratives of athletes in need of image repair. For instance, Sanderson (2010b) explored how fans of professional golfer Tiger Woods used Facebook to counter negative media framings of Woods' marital issues. He observed that fans used Woods Facebook profile to introduce competing narratives about his identity that countered the salacious details being used in the press to describe his extramarital affairs. In contrast to the media accounts that emphasized Woods' sexual passions and poor decision-making, these fans countered that Woods' infidelity was merely a manifestation of his human frailty – a characteristic that made Woods appear more like his supportive fans. As fans increasingly intervene in athletes media narratives, social media sites become valuable tools for athletes to more directly voice identity.

Social media provides an important link between athletes and fans. Athletes in need of image repair must utilize these channels to assertively maintain and control public messages and to persuade fans to advocate on their behalf. In doing so, they can assess how the public is responding to their image repair efforts and adjust their strategies accordingly. Whereas Woods primarily relied on a bolstering strategy, it will be important to observe other strategies that athletes call upon. For instance, if an athlete attacks their accuser or denies responsibility for an action, how do fans respond and how does that influence future image-repair efforts? These and other questions eagerly await exploration.

Discussion Questions:

1.   Woods used a bolstering image repair strategy on Twitter, what other strategies could he have utilized to generate a positive public image?

2.   With respect to image repair, how might a sports organization respond differently than an athlete?

3.   Is it problematic that fan perceptions of an athlete may be based on the extent that the athlete interacts with them on social media?

4.   Is Twitter an optimal social media site for image repair? Under what circumstances would Facebook, UStream, or other social media sites be more optimal? Or should social media sites be integrated when enacting image repair?

5.   Is audience perception an important consideration when crafting image repair strategies? Why or Why Not?

6.   If an athlete or sports organization commits an act and then denies responsibility for that act via social media, is that a wise decision?

Activities

1.   You work as a sports agent who represents a prominent athlete. The athlete informs you he/she was just arrested for possession of cocaine. Design an image repair campaign that will minimize the damage to the athlete's public reputation.

2.   Your group works in the public relations department of a major collegiate athletic program. One morning as you come into work, the Athletic Director summons your group to a meeting where that a national news

story will be breaking that involves several high-profile student-athletes receiving improper benefits. You are instructed to design an image repair campaign for the athletic department using social media. Design and present a campaign including metrics that can be used to evaluate the success of the campaign.

3. Your group works as crisis communication consultants that contract with sports teams. You are contacted by a professional sports team. One of their players has previously had had a well publicized struggle with alcohol and drugs. The athlete has been free of issues for several years, but a news report has just surfaced that the athlete was seen drinking in a local bar. The athlete will be making a public statement in three hours, and you are asked to advise the athlete to maximize a positive response. Design a plan to help the athlete achieve this goal.

Chapter 6

CONCLUSION

In a very short period of time, social media technologies have firmly entrenched themselves in the sports world. As such, sports organizations can no longer ignore these media channels, but must embrace and utilize them. This requires that people in sports organizations be trained to recognize the communication patterns that underpin social media and discover how to best deploy these powerful media tools. Given the relative newness of social media, there is a lack of pedagogical resources available that address social media use in sports. This research provides one effort to satisfy this need. It is imperative that sports and social media research continue to proliferate and that sports communication, sports management, and sports media programs equip students to be competent in navigating the social media maze. This final chapter offers some concluding thoughts about where sports and social media research is headed.

First, when athletes and sports figures have something to say, social media is the domain where they are broadcasting their commentary. Consider the following two examples. On January 23, 2012, Boston Bruins goalie Tim Thomas announced that he was not attending the team's visit to the White House to meet United States President Barack Obama. On November 24, 2011, during a nationally televised broadcast on Thanksgiving Day, Detroit Lions player Ndamukong Suh was ejected after kicking a Green Bay Packers player who was lying on the field. The next day, Suh issued an apology. Where did Thomas and Suh make these announcements? On Facebook. Both of these incidents were

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highly publicized and demonstrate social media's utility for athletes. Had either of these athletes made these announcements via traditional media, it is unlikely that their message would have been transmitted without filtering. Whereas this capability is positive for athletes, it also creates public relations issues for sports organizations (one can imagine the Bruins were not thrilled about Thomas's announcement). Sports organizations must be proactive in working with athletes on strategically using social media. No longer can sports organizations ignore social media, and policies must move beyond simple time restrictions. Athletes should be encouraged to involve fans and work together with sports organizations to maximize social media use.

Second, while social media and sports research is still in its infancy, there is a significant need to answer questions about why athletes and sports figures use social media. What do they perceive the benefits to be? What training and guidance do they receive? Who do they perceive the audience to be? Answering these questions will help promote more strategic social media use and may minimize problematic social media disclosures. For example, on February 11, 2012, University of Maryland basketball player Terrell Stoglin was benched by head coach Mark Turegon. Stoglin was understandably upset, and after the game immediately voiced his frustrations – on Twitter. Stoglin's tweets included, "Loved sittin that bench today. Smfh wow;" "@_Loyalty23 shit its whtev my nigga. Just on this grind was confused with today;" "@_Loyalty23 shit what's good tho, fk tht game g;" and "@Zacky_TheBarber shit krazy bra, we had them g. I'm confused as a muthafuka" (Fasulo, 2012). Naturally, this created a storm of

controversy for Maryland, but it raises questions about whether athletes are given any instructions about venting across social media.

The need for social media training and instruction is particularly pronounced for amateur athletes. That is, younger people are prone to what would be considered inappropriate content on social media sites. As many of their peers post information of this nature, posting inappropriate information becomes normalized. When athletes enter college and their public profile magnifies, they may continue posting inappropriate content as it has never occurred to them that to do so can harm their credibility with coaches, fans, and potential employers. In this regard, sports communication researchers should develop training programs that emphasize the convergence of communication and perception and work with high schools, athletic departments and professional sports teams to promote more conducive social media use.

This call speaks to a third important aspect of future research – the need to develop partnerships with the sports industry, both professional and amateur. There are several ways for such integration to occur. First, sports communication researchers must look for ways to involve sports organizations in their research. For example, in February, 2012, the Arizona Diamondbacks held their annual Fan Fest. What was unique about the incarnation of the event in 2012 was the extent to which the Diamondbacks incorporated social media. The team instituted a digital clubhouse, and during the event, players rotated into the clubhouse to engage fans via social media. The team also encouraged fans to tweet about the event using the hashtag #Dbacksfanfest. Tweets from fans were displayed on the

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jumbotron throughout the event. The team also conducted a scavenger hunt for fans to participate in, by tweeting clues for fans to obtain the required items.

An event of this nature provides valuable data for researchers, which would be of interest to organizations such as the Diamondbacks. For example, fans could be surveyed to determine if their interactions with players via social media predicted behavior such as increased identification with team and purchasing behavior. Player tweets and interaction with fans could be analyzed to ascertain the types of communication occurring and fans could be surveyed to again, see if these interactions predicted other behavior such as likelihood to buy tickets or team memorabilia. Social media also could be incorporated to utilize fan commentary about the event that would assist the team in planning future gatherings (e.g., what fans liked/disliked).

Second, sports communication researchers could develop conferences that would bring together representatives from the academy and sports world. In this respect, sports management and sports analytics programs have set the bar. Consider the Sports Industry Networking and Career Conference, hosted annually by The George Washington University Business School. This event brings together academics, students, and industry professionals and provides a wonderful opportunity for networking. A similar event centered on sports communication is not inconceivable, and perhaps, may not be all that distant. The Summit on Communication and Sport organization recently announced it would become incorporated and known as the International Association for Communication and

Sport. This transition will boost the visibility of the organization and open up doors to work with industry.

Third, and perhaps most important, more communication departments must embrace sports communication research and develop programs that will train students to work in the sports industry. This will enable relationships to be cultivated as students can be placed in internships with sports organizations, providing access to sports professionals who can be invited for lectures at conferences and in the classroom. Then, as these students graduate and enter the sports industry, they can be utilized for future internships and will add to networking possibilities between researchers and industry. These are only some of the potential avenues that can be explored to build meaningful partnerships between sports communication researchers and industry professionals.

In summary, tremendous opportunities await sports and social media researchers. The future is definitely bright and full of potential. Accordingly, those who pursue this line of inquiry have a great responsibility to create materials that will help students grasp the power that social media possesses. In doing so, the sports communication field will continue to blossom and eventually become commonplace. Indeed, it may not be all that long before sports communication research is invited to National and International Communication Associations, making the transition from bench player to sought after free-agent.

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