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**THE CHALLENGES OF SPORTS TELEVISION REPORTING IN THE  
CONTEMPORARY SPORTS-MEDIA COMPLEX**

A Dissertation in

Mass Communications

by

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## ABSTRACT

As the Internet and its associated new technologies have expanded their reach, so too have their influence on our media; however, their effect on our contemporary sports media has not yet been adequately explored. Furthermore, while scholars have examined the work of sports journalists, particularly those in the print media, they have largely neglected those working in the television industry. This research considers how the work of television sports reporters is changing and evolving in the digital era. Through the ethnographic techniques of participant observation and interviews with both reporters and field producers at a regional sports channel in a major East Coast market, I provide an in-depth look at the work of reporters in the world of sports television. The study reveals a high level of complexity in the reporter's day-to-day work as well as a view of the transformations the sports-media complex is undergoing in the digital age. Sports television reporters must negotiate and perform multiple professional identities, which are often in conflict with one another. They are also dealing with the destabilization of their position in the hierarchy of the sports media due largely to the Internet, which empowers athletes and sports fans and challenges the primacy of professional sports journalists. Participants have been forced to adapt to technological change and the increased workload that accompanies it. Corporate ownership adds yet another degree of difficulty as sports television reporters at this regional sports channel must navigate an organizational setting that exerts a significant influence on their daily work. Such issues and developments reveal the sports television workplace as increasingly complicated and

problematic for those working in it. Recommendations for sports reporters as well as regional sports channels are provided along with suggestions for future research.

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

This study seeks to examine how the job of sports television reporters has changed in the contemporary sports-media complex. The purpose of this research is to examine with a sample of newsgathering personnel at a sports television station their perceptions of their job and its difficulties including their relationships with key information sources. While this study began with the more narrow focus of examining the reporter-source relationship in sports journalism, it eventually and necessarily expanded to include a broader variety of issues and changes sports reporters are dealing with in their jobs. The knowledge generated from this research should provide a snapshot of the evolving sports media landscape in the digital age. Furthermore, it should also add new insights and understanding to this important aspect of sports media and may ultimately help to inform journalistic practices. This study employed ethnographic techniques, participant observation and interviews to investigate this particular facet of the sports-media complex. Participants in this study included a purposefully selected group of 14 reporters and field producers at a regional sports channel in a major East Coast television market.

### **Background and Context**

“Ignoring sport today would be like ignoring the church in the Middle Ages or art during the Renaissance,” as Michael Real (1998) so fittingly stated over a decade ago (p. 15). This observation rings even truer today. An illustration of sport’s power in

contemporary society was especially evident when the Republican Party chose to delay John McCain's acceptance speech for the party's presidential nomination at the 2008 Republican National Convention until the season-opening game of the National Football League had ended. Sports have a tremendous economic impact in the United States. Estimates place the size of the entire sports industry at \$410.6 billion (Plunkett Research, Ltd., 2009). The influence of sports in the consumer marketplace has been unparalleled for some time now; advertising executives have stated that by 1992 the psychological content of selling was often more sports-oriented than sexual (Katz, 1994). Today, annual corporate spending for sports advertising in the U.S. is \$30 billion (Plunkett Research, Ltd., 2009). The cumulative global television audience for the 2010 World Cup in South Africa was expected to reach 26 billion people (Gleeson, 2009). Moreover, the media attention that focused on Tiger Woods' marital infidelities and LeBron James' free agency decision provides further evidence of the power of sports and sporting celebrity in contemporary society. Indeed, sports occupy an enviable position in the United States and the world today and warrant scholarly attention. As Hesmondhalgh (2002) states, "It is not enough to dismiss the pleasures of entertainment as a distraction from 'real' politics. We need to rethink how the massive presence of entertainment in people's everyday lives affects not only our notions of how democracy works, but also how we think about other aspects of human life, including ourselves as feeling, emotional beings" (p. 30).

The rise of sports is inextricably intertwined with the mass media. The symbiotic relationship between the two has been termed the "sports-media complex" (Jhally, 1989, p. 77). The media provide sports with an abundance of two indispensable elements: streams of revenue and publicity. The multiple streams of revenue feed sports' capitalist



sensibilities. Publicity plays a complementary role, helping sports to create and sustain fan interest. Sports provide the media with highly prized programming and content, enabling the media to attract a desirable audience and thus advertisers. This association has proved to be a fruitful one for both institutions since the late nineteenth century. The two have become so interdependent that it has become difficult to picture one without the other, and such a scenario would certainly be less profitable for both.

Scholars have noted three forces transforming the contemporary sports-media complex: globalization, digitization and marketization (Boyle, 2006a). Globalization is the result of sports' and the media's desire to expand their audience internationally, beyond just local, regional and national markets. Digitization is a nod to the effect technology has on the sports media environment. The speed with which information and content is being delivered to audiences has undergone rapid changes in just the past decade alone. The Internet, new media and social-networking media are all part of digitization. Finally, marketization refers to the ceaseless commercialization of sports by a wide variety of interests and entities. These forces are reshaping the sports media landscape, as we currently know it, in significant ways.

The sports reporter has long played an important role in the sports-media complex. In many ways the reporter acts as a link between the sports world and the media domain. The reporter gathers and prepares news for distribution to a voracious audience. The ability to produce such content for any media outlet relies heavily upon the cultivation of sources of information, thus, the importance of the reporter-source relationship. This relationship has received considerable attention from political journalism scholars over a period of decades (Sigal, 1973; Strentz, 1978; Manning, 2001;

Gans, 2004). While the reporter-source relationship in sports can be said to parallel that same relationship in hard news, it can also be viewed as unique in a variety of ways (Lowes, 2000). *Inside the Sports Pages* by Mark Douglas Lowes (2000) is one of the rare studies paying special attention to the sports reporter and his or her relationship to news sources, although the study was not conducted at an American newspaper and is now one decade old.

The little research into the reporter-source relationship in sports that does exist along with accounts from sports journalists reveals a persistently fraying relationship between reporters and their main sources – athletes, coaches and team management in general. This deterioration of the reporter-source relationship has been an issue in sports journalism for several decades and serves to increase the difficulty of the reporter’s job (Koppett, 1981; Telander, 1984; Sokolove, 1996; Lowes, 2000). Furthermore, changes occurring in the reporter-source relationship are directly related to the content produced by the sports media (Sokolove, 1996). Content has the potential to inform and influence the audience’s decisions and choices. Put another way, changes to the reporter-source relationship may result in changes to the relationship between fans and sports.

The worsening relationship between athletes and coaches and reporters, coupled with the increasing reluctance and sometimes refusal of franchises to allow these sources to speak with the media, often results in coverage that is repetitive and indistinguishable among sports media outlets (Coakley, 2009). Others have decried the lack of investigative and business reporting in sports journalism especially considering the economic power and cultural sway sport holds over contemporary society (Aamidor, 2003; Boyle, 2006b; Jurkowitz, 2006; Rowe, 2007; Poole, 2009). Additionally, an

improved understanding of the production of sports media content may provide insight into the mixture of news and entertainment that hard news journalism has been trending toward (Thussu, 2009).

The reporter-source relationship is a complicated one partly because interactions between reporters and sources are subject to all the complexities of interpersonal communication (Hall, Nichols, Moynahan & Taylor, 2007). This complexity includes social identities such as gender and race, which also play a role in the dynamic between reporter and source (Strentz, 1978; Lachover, 2005). The trials and tribulations of female sports reporters' interactions and dealings with athletes have been well documented (Fornoff, 1993; Creedon, 1994; Druzin, 2001; Allum, 2002; Hardin & Shain, 2005). Meanwhile, editors believe that racial identity translates into improved rapport between reporters and athletes of similar races or ethnicities, which can influence their story assignment practices and negatively impact minority reporters (Rowe, 1999; Wolper, 2005). Overall, progress toward equality for women and minorities in the white, male bastion of the sports media continues to be slow. Researchers gave US newspapers and websites affiliated with the Associated Press Sports Editors (APSE) a 'C' for racial diversity and a 'F' for gender diversity following a 2008 study (Lapchick, Little, Mathew & Zahn, 2008). As Lapchick pointed out, "Our media clearly neither reflects America's workforce nor the competitors in the world of sports" (p. 2).

Much of the existing sports and media literature focuses on print sports journalism; however, sports television production has been specifically noted for its hybrid quality: varying amounts of journalism, light entertainment and drama (Whannel, 1992). Critics point to sports television's tendency to play up the entertainment and

drama aspects over journalism (Gruneau, 1989; Whannel, 1992; Boyle, 2006). Major differences exist between the jobs of print media reporters and those in television. Researchers have long known that television reporters are more dependent on routine sources (Drew, 1972) and activities such as press conferences (Atwater & Fico, 1986), which demonstrates television reporters' vulnerability to public relations efforts to control the flow of information. Editorial differences also exist between the two. For instance, broadcast reporters' stories have been found to be more dramatic as opposed to print reporters who tend to generate stories with better background information (Atwater & Fico).

In addition to the deteriorating reporter-source relationship and the evolving sports media landscape, the sports reporter's job has been complicated by conflicts of interest from companies owning both sports franchises and the sports channels that cover them (Strauss, 1998; Kramer, 2002; Moss, 2008). Such ownership scenarios are said to be a natural fit in today's media world (Strauss). Snyder and Spreitzer (1983) point out that those in sports broadcasting must appeal to more than just the listener or viewer; the happiness of the franchise's owner, corporate sponsors, and the parent company of the television (or radio) station must also be taken into consideration.

The lack of research in this area means scholars lack an adequate understanding of the changes occurring in the sports-media complex and their consequences for the sports reporter. Sports television reporters must deal with the stress of an industry in transition while those wishing to enter the business must develop the skills necessary to break into this dynamic and ultra-competitive field. A thorough understanding of the field, its practices and the challenges that need to be faced, is crucial for success here.

The growth and influence of the sports-media complex brings with it issues that necessitate exploration and investigation. As Boyle (2006a) has stated, “the expansion in sports journalism actually says something more complex about the evolving relationship between journalism, the media and pop culture, and offers challenges to both critics and educators involved in evaluating its wider impact” (p. 2). This study is aimed at meeting that challenge and tackling some of the key issues facing sports reporters in the world of sports television.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to examine the work of sports television newsgathering personnel in a major East Coast television market including their daily work routines, the challenges they face, and their relationships and interactions with information sources. It is an attempt to improve our understanding of how reporters view the changes taking place in the sports media, the issues they perceive as complicating their relationships with athletes, teams, fans, and management as well as their jobs in general. Through participant observation and interviews with both reporters and field producers in the environment of the all-sports newsroom, I will explore the nature of this important relationship and tie it to existing literature on media work and the practice of journalism, the sociology of sports, gender/race relations and other identity issues. The following research questions guide my inquiry:

1. What factors complicate the reporter-source relationship in sports?
2. What role does social identity play in the reporter-source relationship?

3. How is the medium of sports television dealing with the factors complicating the reporter-source relationship and the resulting changes taking place in the sports-media complex?

### **Research Design Overview**

With the approval of The Pennsylvania State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), I studied the experiences and perceptions of the newsgathering personnel at the regional sports network where I was formerly a full-time employee. I continue to freelance at the station; however, I did not accept any freelance opportunities during the course of my data collection in an effort to avoid potential conflicts of interest as well as to convey to participants (and thus former colleagues) my new role as researcher. This study used ethnographic techniques. Fourteen reporters and field producers participated in long interviews (McCracken, 1988), the primary method of data collection. Additionally, a variety of informal interviews were conducted with station personnel. I also employed participant observation in both the newsroom and out in the field shadowing reporters. The information obtained provided the basis for the findings of this study. Each participant was given a pseudonym, and all long interviews were digitally recorded by me and transcribed verbatim by a transcriptionist.

My professional experience working at this regional sports network along with a comprehensive review of the relevant literature helped me develop the data collection methods. Participant observation and informal interviews allowed for a more refined question guide. The development and refinement of coding categories was ongoing based on a combination of what I observed compared with the relevant literature, my prior professional experiences, and any emerging themes. As I moved from analysis to

synthesis of the data, I followed a three-step process. I first discovered connections between the data, then identified connections between categories of data before finally integrating the emergent themes in order to derive an explanation for the study. Credibility and dependability were accounted for through the strategies of member checks, peer review and the documenting of an audit trail.

### **Assumptions**

Based on my experience and background as a working member as well as an observer and scholar of the sports media, I worked from several assumptions. First, the sports-media complex is in the midst of a dramatic transformation due largely to the rise of the Internet and its associated technologies, although other factors are also playing roles in this important shift. Television, for the first time since its arrival as a mass medium, faces serious competition for its title as the preeminent force in the sports media. Second, the sports reporter, in the role of gatherer and packager/presenter of information, occupies an important place in the production of sports media content and, thus, plays a significant role in the sustenance and maintenance of the sports-media complex. Third, the job of the contemporary sports reporter is more complicated than has been previously acknowledged by its nearly universal moniker as the “toy department.” Fourth, the changes that have been taking place in the relationship between sports reporters and their key information sources such as athletes and coaches are not temporary. These changes have irrevocably altered interactions between the two. Fifth - and finally - the changes taking place within the sports-media complex as well as within

the reporter-source relationship can have a meaningful effect on the content produced by sports television reporters and stations and thus what the sports audience consumes.

### **The Researcher**

I have been pursuing my doctorate at The Pennsylvania State University since 2006 while also teaching full-time at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania. I was hired to teach in the Telecommunications track in the Department of Mass Communications in 2005 largely because I have professional experience in the television/broadcast journalism industries. I have worked as a news show producer at ABC news affiliates as well as at a regional sports network station where I was employed as both a show and field producer. I continue to freelance periodically for the sports station in order to maintain a working knowledge of the television industry, something I consider important to my ability to educate students who aspire to eventually work in the television industry. Based on my professional experience in sports television, I possess an intimate knowledge of the research subject.

I also freely acknowledge that the same professional experience may also function as a liability, especially in regard to the research project's design and my interpretation of the findings. In addition to making my assumptions and the theoretical orientation explicit from the beginning of the study, I earnestly practiced self-reflection throughout the project via journaling and discussion with colleagues and my dissertation advisor. In an effort to further address my subjectivity and improve the credibility of the study, several safeguards were used including the triangulation of data sources, a combination of ethnographic techniques as well as through member checks.



## **Chapter Two**

### **Review of the Literature**

The purpose of this study was to examine the work of reporters and field producers at a regional sports channel in a major East Coast television market. To adequately assess how the changes taking place in the contemporary sports-media complex are affecting these newsgatherers, it was necessary to complete a critical review of associated literature. This review was ongoing throughout all phases of the study.

This critical review explores the connection between participants and their sports television work in three key areas: (1) the sports-media complex, (2) the reporter-source relationship, and (3) social identity. A review of the literature on the sports-media complex provides the structural and cultural environment in which participants operate. The reporter-source relationship is reviewed from both journalistic and sporting angles in order to provide the context, history, rules and regulations under which reporters must work to do their jobs. The concept of social identity is reviewed as a basis for a sociological discussion of reporter-source interactions and their professional lives in the sports media in general.

In order to conduct this literature review, I used multiple information sources including books (some scholarly and others best described as memoirs and biographical works), professional journals and periodicals, and Internet sources. In some instances I took a historical approach in order to trace the evolution and development of such concepts as the sports-media complex and the reporter-source relationship. This approach is useful in part because of the dearth of critical literature in some of the key areas of this

study. However as Hesmondhalgh (2002) points out, “Good historical analysis can help to undermine casual assumptions about the present and the near future.” Because of this historical element, no specific time frame was used to delimit the literature search. Throughout the chapter, I attempted to point out areas where the existing research is lacking or insufficiently addresses an important area of discussion. Contested areas or issues are also pointed out and discussed where necessary.

### **The Sports-Media Complex**

The sports-media complex is a term coined by Sut Jhally (1989) derived from his tracing of the history of the symbiotic relationship between sports and the media and how each institution influenced the structure and livelihood of the other. Other terms have since been used to describe the interdependent association between media and sports such as the “media sports cultural complex” (Rowe, 1999) or the more specific “television/sports complex” (Klatell & Marcus 1988). A historical tracing of the origin, evolution and development of the marriage of sports and the media plays a crucial role in the comprehension of its contemporary incarnation. At its core, the sports-media complex is a product of a host of interrelated political-economic and socio-cultural factors.

#### **Origins.**

The relationship between sports and the media originated in America in the latter part of the nineteenth century and reached critical mass in the 1920s, also known as “the golden age of sport.” Newspapers and magazines, the dominant media of the late

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, used sports to increase readership and, in turn, increase profits not only through the sale of newspapers and magazines but also through the prices they could charge advertisers for advertising space. The print media's economic interest in sports grew partly out of a growing public appetite for sports news however, the media also helped to construct the contemporary sports fan. Michael Oriard (1993) notes that today we take the sports audience for granted but in organized sports' fledgling years an audience had to be developed and the print media were key to this process, particularly with regard to college football. The other media of the day, such as radio, film and fiction, also contributed to this emerging phenomenon. Sports took advantage of this media-generated publicity and used its budding prominence in society to insert itself into the public mind and America's growing entertainment options. This attention helped to produce sports heroes, a new phenomenon in American culture at the time. Commentators of the day lamented that more people knew who Notre Dame football coach Knute Rockne was than the presiding officer of the Senate (Dyreson, 1989; Britz, 1993). The end result of this affinity was the growth of mediated and spectator sports on an unprecedented level. For many, sports were becoming a sort of secular religion. Even the Dean of Harvard's Divinity School said one of the deepest spiritual experiences he ever had was on a Saturday afternoon in the Harvard football stadium (Tunis, 1928).

Sport's transformation from sport for sport's sake into a spectator activity produced a couple of distinct responses from the early twentieth century media. On one side, many believed they were living through the greatest array of athletic exploits the world had ever known. Grantland Rice and many of the other well-known sportswriters

of the day befriended the sports stars they wrote about and rarely had a negative thing to report about them. Many viewed their journalistic careers as directly connected to the stars they cultivated and made no apologies for the embellished prose that dominated the writing and reporting of the era. For this they were dubbed the “gee whiz” school of sportswriting (Evensen, 1996; Oriard, 2001). The other perspective was one of abhorrence at the emerging status of sports. These people saw sports as a means for betterment, not an end in itself. Social commentators such as John Tunis as well as a minority of sportswriters including Westbrook Pegler and Ring Lardner held this more aristocratic view. These more hard-boiled reporters came to be known as the “aw shucks” school. They railed against the hypocrisy of sports and failed to see any benefit to society in the new mindset toward it. Ultimately the “aw shucks” sportswriters were able to add precious little balance to the coverage of the day. The media content was overwhelmingly promotional, and it resonated with the fast-growing, leisure-obsessed audience (Tunis, 1928; Evensen, 1996; Oriard, 2001). It supplied Americans with a soothing elixir as they grappled with an unprecedented and unsettling time in the young nation’s history.

The humble beginnings of the emergence of the sports-media complex can be traced to the 1870s with the creation of the National League of Professional Baseball Clubs. The legitimate formation of a league, the basic unit of organization in team games, was a crucial initial step. This set-up provided a successful formula that would be copied by every sports league to this day: the clubs become less autonomous under the rule of a collective power and the players become employees (Koppett, 1981). The blueprint provided by professional baseball illustrated that club management must have authority, player movement must be controlled, a central governing power must exist, and that one-

sided competition is a detriment to fan interest (Koppett). Such organization also abetted the league's ability to garner better and more frequent press coverage. It was in this way that baseball became the first mass entertainment sport in America following the Civil War. As Leonard Koppett (1981) explains, this would hardly seem a coincidence. While the Civil War declared that the nation is preeminent above regional allegiances, regionalism had surely not entirely dissipated. Baseball provided people with a safe outlet to express these allegiances and sentiments. War and the military would play an important role in the development of the sports-media complex in additional ways for decades to come.

As early as the late nineteenth century the popular press helped to place college football at the forefront of American's expanding sport and entertainment choices (Oriard, 2001). At about the same time, the U.S. was using international sporting venues such as the modern Olympic Games for nationalistic purposes (Dyreson, 2008). Scholastic track and field events also garnered significant publicity (Paddock, 1932). At the turn of the century sports such as baseball, football, boxing, and track and field were growing at a substantial rate. Michael Oriard (1993) has contended that the daily press in New York City had an impact on college football in the 1880s and 1890s greater than television's effect on pro football in the 1950s and 1960s. It was obvious, even before the twentieth century commenced, that as leisure time increased and a middle class emerged, sports had the potential to be a cultural and economic force to be reckoned with. However, the Great War (1914-1918) would temporarily place the ascension of America's sporting obsession on hold.

As World War I came to a close, a sporting spectacle would herald what the United States and the rest of the world could expect from sport in the coming decade. The Inter-Allied Games, held in the summer of 1919 in Paris, were sports on a grand scale. A host of events pitted military personnel from around the globe against one another as they vied for gold medals in front of the likes of U.S. President Woodrow Wilson and an array of kings, princes and generals from around the world (Paddock, 1932). Bruce Evensen (1996) credits the Inter-Allied games with igniting the media's fascination with big-time sporting events. It was a fascination that would intensify.

The end of the First World War signaled significant socio-cultural changes in both America's values and its realization of the developments that had been taking place since the advent of industrialization. America was in the throes of modernization and a soon-to-be accompanying spirit of consumerism. The dull existence produced by the work of industrialization created a need for leisure and escape like never before, and sports were an ideal antidote. This gravitation to sports also represented a rebellion against the Puritan tradition (Rice, 1954). Sports in all of its forms contributed to the breaking down of the rigid Puritan discipline, but it was college football with its attendant penchant for spectacle that especially provided Americans with an outlet for both rebellion and escape (Oriard, 1993). This moment in American history was a disquieting time, and the emergence of sports as a major form of entertainment provided a clear sign that America's values and mindset were shifting.

The comfort produced by attendance at mass spectator events and the desire for the cultivation of community and togetherness, were satiated through sports; however, the reason for sports resonance with the American public at this time goes even deeper.

Commentators noted a certain post-war anxiety as people searched for meaning in a world that was beginning to make less and less sense (Evensen, 1996). Perhaps the confidence exuded by the sports stars of this era – Jack Dempsey, Babe Ruth and Red Grange – spoke to the ill-at-ease public (Rice, 1954). These athletes became larger-than-life personalities in the 1920s. Fans and sportswriters alike craved and demanded color, personality and style from them, and those stars who provided the most compelling of these assets were propelled to a celebrity status never before imagined (Rice, 1954; Susman, 1984; Carroll, 1999). Paul Gallico (1938) spoke of the heroes of this era as being more familiar to fans than members of their own families because of the overabundance of press coverage bestowed upon them. However, fascination with these stars was due to the personification of other issues buried deep within the psyche of American society, such as the need to see that success was possible even for those from the most humble of beginnings and a nostalgia for the frontier of the nineteenth century and all that it symbolized.

The majority of Americans now lived in crowded cities, but for many their values were a product of the farm or the village. The days of the pioneer were over, but sporting heroes could fill this void, especially those who could fit into the image of the heroic frontier man (Britz, 1993). Hall of Fame running back Bronko Nagurski and boxer Jack Dempsey achieved this better than anyone else. Others such as Jim Thorpe and the football-playing Indians of professional football also evoked this same kind of nostalgia for the masculinity associated with the frontier of yesteryear (Springwood, 2005). Nagurski combined natural abilities, including unheard of strength, with a modesty that

appealed to fans and sportswriters, and he eventually grew into a hero of mythological proportions (Britz).

Dempsey was an even more significant figure in the “roaring twenties.” His first championship bout versus Gene Tunney in 1926 drew 130,000 spectators and 39 million listeners (Evensen, 1996). It was a shared experience that was unprecedented in American history. Headlines for the fight were as large as those declaring the armistice that ended the Great War (Evensen). The press helped create drama and intensified fan interest in the bout. Dempsey – from the West – was the individualist from the frontier. Tunney – from the East – represented “the guile of the city” (Evensen). Promoters and the press played these competing images of society against one another in the portrayals of Dempsey and Tunney. The plan worked very well, bringing in more than two million dollars at the gate as well as unprecedented newspaper sales (Evensen). Sports, and the media’s coverage, would never be the same.

According to Evensen (1996), the mass media of the day knowingly cultivated these images and exploited the emotions and feelings of the time: “The arena of mass-mediated sports spectatorship with its promotion of expressive involvement became a ritual of social life during the jazz age through which audiences either bonded as intimates or separated themselves from those who saw the fight and fighters differently” (p. xvii). While boxing was already among the most popular sports of the day, sports journalists harnessed the power in this athletic event’s conflict and used it to appeal to a mass audience with unparalleled success. As Evensen demonstrates, other fights did not succeed in attracting the same interest. The media’s storytelling strategies didn’t always seduce fans, and certain storylines and drama played better than others. The Dempsey-



Tunney drama that unfolded during the latter half of the decade was an unrivaled success precisely because it depicted the ongoing struggle regarding shifting American values and sentiments, and the public responded favorably to this. Bruce Bliven captures the essence of this new phenomenon of hero-worship in “Worshipping the American Hero”:

“Americans, like other Western peoples, feel an uneasy, increasing sense of insecurity in the modern world, where they seem more and more to be the puppets of great economic forces which are beyond anyone’s power to control. In this predicament, they turn with relief to anyone who, in any field, appears to stand out conspicuously beyond his fellows. They feel the world needs giants – as perhaps it does; and when they find one, they pretend to themselves that he is taller than in fact he is” (in Britz, 1993, p. 101).

The other deeply embedded issue residing in the psyche of the American public revolved around the rise of corporate, bureaucratic America and the powerlessness it engendered in the working and growing middle classes. As Leo Lowenthal (1968) has explained, self-made successes characterized the first decades of the century. These “idols of production” dangled the carrot of success with the adage that hard work was the key (p. 115). By the 1920s, stories of sports stars who had overcome tremendous obstacles until their athletic gifts eventually shined through were the common themes. Lowenthal argues that these “idols of consumption” were not indicative of a society based on merit but of the belief that only through luck or the most fortunate of circumstances could one achieve success (p. 115). This describes the bleak outlook many Americans felt was there lot in life. As Michael Oriard (1993) puts it, the question for people now was “how to salvage personal achievement, even heroism, for a new age of corporate industrialism” (p. 178).

Babe Ruth and Red Grange epitomize the heroes who spoke to people with this perspective on life during the age of industrialization. Grange, and his impeccable timing

in terms of his stellar performances on the football field, is a classic example of an “idol of consumption.” Grange grew up poor and faced difficult challenges before a timely display of his athletic abilities vaulted him into the national limelight and conferred upon him celebrity status (Carroll, 1999). Ruth was the orphan who transformed the sport of baseball with his home run prowess and then became the first \$100,000 player. Ruth was an extraordinary personality; sportswriters competed with each other to provide him with suitable nicknames. “The Bambino” was larger than life. His prodigious home runs and his conspicuous consumption all resonated with fans (Susman, 1984). Americans could only dream of the same type of success in this new America. They lived vicariously through the likes of Babe Ruth and Harold “Red” Grange, for the only way for them to truly relate to these new idols was as fellow consumers (Lowenthal, 1968).

The press’ creation of sports heroes as well as its shaping of the drama of sporting events was directly affected by the climate of the times and the uncertain values of the American public. Through sports – the contests and the athletes, and the media’s coverage of them – the American people grappled with a wide variety of issues. Sports and the media gave meaning to people’s lives in this way at this distinct moment in time. In short, “the golden age of sport” personified the worries and insecurities of this era. According to Bruce Evensen (1996), it was “a generation rushing to the future while remaining passionate about its past” (p. xi). Some believed the Great Depression of the 1930s would quash this sporting obsession, but it did not; sports and the media thrived through the inter-war period.

Of course, economic imperatives were also a driving force in the development of the contemporary American sports-media complex. The penny press and yellow

journalism had already proven that the media possessed the potential to be a lucrative industry, but newspaper barons Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst saw the opportunity to further increase readership through the expansion of the sports page. In the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century boxing was arguably the most popular sport in America and was certainly the favorite of the masses. This popularity was something both Pulitzer and Hearst actively sought to take advantage of at their newspapers. Both posted reporters and artists at the training sites of “Gentleman Jim” Corbett and Charlie Mitchell before their championship bout in 1894, an early sign of the recognition that sports coverage could translate into better circulation (Evensen, 1993). Pulitzer was the first to treat the sports section extravagantly, which would soon be copied by all of the major dailies (Oriard, 1993). Hearst quadrupled the size of the *New York Journal’s* sports section when he was locked in a heated circulation war with Pulitzer. Hearst also stressed the visual impact of the sports page, which would soon be convention (Evensen, 1996).

Even *The New York Times* expanded its sports coverage as a means to rescue the paper from bankruptcy. Under Adolph Ochs, the paper of the upper class increased the size of its sports section 40 percent. *The Chicago Tribune* had a 17-member sports department and supplemented it with numerous syndicated correspondents as well as a nationwide network of reporters in major college towns (Evensen, 1996). The sports page was becoming a powerhouse. Sports news had experienced a 50 percent increase over twenty years, and there appeared to be no end in sight. Meanwhile, editors were growing distressed. There were murmurs that newspapers were just “gigantic commercial operations,” and that the sports department lacked any sense of morality (Evensen, p. xiv). The growing independence and lucrative salaries of sports reporters created major

concerns as did the puffed-up content. Editors soon viewed sports as a threat and urged a return to journalism's traditional role of "educating the youth of America to the wholesome benefits of amateur athletics" (Evensen, p. 50). In 1923 senior editors formed a national organization of newspaper editors to combat these abuses, which they felt threatened journalism's reputation (Evensen).

Spectacles such as the Dempsey-Tunney fights did nothing to quell such talk; however, they did show newspapers that they risked much by downplaying sports. Expectations for the first Dempsey-Tunney bout were so pronounced that the Associated Press (AP) was forced to establish a sports department of first eight, then twelve people to cover it (Evensen, 1996). The sporting fervor had also extended into other forms of mass communication. The bout created an opportunity to sell more radios and millions, including the deaf who made arrangements to have an interpreter provide a running account of the fight, tuned into the broadcast. The phenomenon reached across national boundaries as well. Dempsey-Tunney I was heard in South America, Europe, Asia and Africa (Evensen). Sports grip on the American public was literally deadly. When Dempsey knocked down Tunney, ten fans died of heart attacks and two more just afterward (Evensen). Sportswriters such as Paul Gallico (1938) insisted they weren't irresponsible in their reporting; they were simply giving the public what it wanted.

The sports appetite of the burgeoning American middle class in the late nineteenth century is perhaps the most important development in the rise of the sporting press. Part of this appetite can be traced to the military with its belief that athletic training made for better soldiers. Enlisted men, indeed a large percentage of American men, engaged in sports of all types during the years of World War I. This athletic activity culminated in

the Inter-Allied Games but, more importantly, it fostered an increased interest in sports when soldiers returned home (Carroll, 1999). It also solidified sports' masculine fan base. Physical education in high schools won out over the alternative of military training. New York City's Public School Athletic League (PSAL) became a manifestation of this key curriculum change. Backed by the likes of John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie, the PSAL popularized the notion of interscholastic athletics for secondary school children and instilled in these students an interest in sports that would contribute to the next generation's passion for sports (Carroll).

The desire of the emerging middle class to escape the difficulties of their lives, even if only for a little while, created a demand for sports news and information the press was only too happy to supply. The middle class delighted in statistics as a means of measuring success such as with the exploits of showmen such as Babe Ruth (Susman, 1984). Koppett (1981) has described statistics as the linchpin of continuing fan interest, and the newspapers were quick to print them. The middle class also sought to emulate social elites and as Oriard (1993) describes, college football games became an ideal venue. Soon events such as the Thanksgiving Day games in New York City became as much about being there, and possibly making the society page, as the game itself. The press' embrace of football in its formative years would help to create a sport that crossed class boundaries. Where once attendance at sporting events was delineated in large measure by class – horse racing for elites, prizefighting and baseball for the working class – football became a sport for everyone (Oriard). Many colleges and universities constructed immense stadiums and the press played an instrumental role in filling them. Journalists constructed stories that sought to make the game meaningful to an audience

that crossed social and economic groups by incorporating both the social element and the action of the game in their stories along with the use of what Oriard has aptly dubbed “verbal pyrotechnics” – a nod to the hyperbole and purple prose that characterized the writing of the time (p. 87).

The rise of the middle class was partly serendipitous for the newspaper industry, but its use of sports to attract the female demographic was certainly purposeful. While the sports page has always been a heavily male dominion, newspapers did see the benefits of attracting a female audience during this period. Women earned the right to vote in 1920, but many believed the right to play sports was an even more important victory for their gender. Women embraced participation in sports like never before in the 1920s, and soon became both “icons of liberty” and “objects of desire” (Dyreson, 2003, p. 435). The press fully exploited the appeal of female athletes, particularly Olympic athletes, as both emblematic of their gender’s newly achieved freedoms and as sexually appealing to a male audience. Sportswriters unapologetically used female athletes as sex symbols (Gallico, 1938). However, evidence of progress for American women could be more readily found in sports than in other areas of society (Dyreson). This tended to occur through the press. The treatment of sports as spectacle and social event in the press broadened sports interest to women, and this translated into more women attending sporting events. The first full-time female sports journalist/columnist at a daily newspaper appeared in the 1920s. Margaret Goss, writing for the *New York Herald Tribune*, championed female athletics while sharing the same page as Grantland Rice’s columns. By the end of the decade, female sports journalists were present in several

sports departments and an obvious sign of the press' desire to speak to a female audience (Kaszuba, 2006).

Other developments in mass communication factored into the growing symbiosis between sports and the media. American society's transition to a consumer culture and the public's unprecedented desire for sports and its heroes coincided with the growing importance of the mass communication practices of advertising, marketing and public relations. Advertising was instrumental in aiding the transition from a production-centered system to a consumer-centered system, and it helped to shape a national culture in which sports would play an increasingly large role (Susman, 1984). The effectiveness of advertising allowed the press to grow quickly, offering more extensive coverage while reaching a larger and more diverse audience.

Public relations and marketing, mostly in the form of promotion, also emerged. Promoters such as Tex Rickard and Charles "Cash and Carry" Pyle developed strategies for turning their clients into household names and major drawing cards. They provided the media with information and storylines in return for free publicity. They exploited the papers in many ways such as by claiming that proceeds from events would go to certain charities in order to garner favorable coverage or by laying out a buffet to greet reporters to a press conference. Promoters involved writers in stories or used them as judges or referees (Evensen, 1996). Sometimes sportswriters were their own matchmakers and promoters (Rice, 1954). Promoters commonly paid off or "sugared" sportswriters for positive coverage. Sportswriters were also the ghostwriters for articles and books as well as other promotional work (Evensen).

The most famous public relations agents were Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays. Many practitioners honed their skills working for the Creel Committee, which effectively influenced public opinion regarding America's involvement in World War I. Athletes surrounded themselves with the publicity and promotional gurus of the day. Legendary coaches such as Knute Rockne also employed the publicity agent. This pre-cursor to the sports information director (SID) was established in college football by the 1930s (Oriard, 1993). Even high schools sent out press releases regarding their athletic exploits (Tunis, 1928). This transformation of the sports scene led John Tunis (1928) to decry the emphasis being placed on the promotional and business aspects of the sports world; he proclaimed that the boxers of the day were last of all fighters and the baseball players were businessmen, not sportsmen.

### **Political Interests.**

Political interests also contributed in important ways to the shaping of the sports-media complex. Those who sought to define and control the power of sports appeal did so for a number of political purposes. Almost as soon as there were indications that sports had potential as a cultural force, political groups and parties tried to dictate its use based on their beliefs and interests, both social and economic. The emerging use of sports as a leisurely pursuit was anathema to traditional ideas that viewed sports as a tool to be used to order modern American society (Dyreson, 1989). Those from the intellectual class believed sports could and should be used to order modernity. Progressives viewed sports as a social "technology" that could effectively adapt people to the new social order. Radicals considered sports the new opiate of the masses, a new distraction to prevent the



working class from revolting against those who controlled the means of production (Dyreson). All political factions understood sports as a method for spreading basic norms and values.

In many ways, attempts to ideologically define sports were a masculine reaction to the new social order. The post-World War I sentiment that the men of America were getting soft was combated with sports. The outdoor lifestyle, at one time the regular domain of the American male, was no longer. Sports, in particular football because of its “sanctioned savagery,” allowed men to validate their masculinity (Oriard, 2001, p. 220). This can be traced in part to the Victorian notion of Muscular Christianity, the movement for a physical and Christian spiritual development. Walter Camp, “the father of American football,” advocated his own unique view of football (Oriard, 1993, p. 35). To Camp, the game was a reflection of the American corporation and could be used to train young men for life after football, a strictly technocratic and managerial interpretation (Oriard). Others bemoaned the eroding values of the once proud amateur ideal – that sports were to be played for sport’s sake and not monetary gain – and they wished to re-establish these values (Oriard). There was a battle to define all variety of athletics, a battle that played out in the press and was read by the sporting audience, and it had a considerable effect on the way people conceived of and consumed sports (Oriard).

The right to define the role of sports in society took on its most important tone in the international arena. America’s political players have long viewed the Olympic Games as an ideal platform for nationalistic displays. As Mark Dyreson (2008) has shown, America has long used performance in international competitions as yardsticks for measuring national status, manufacturing national mythologies, creating national

memories, shaping ethnic identities, encoding racial typologies, touting American exceptionalism and exporting American culture in various ways. America's efforts to export its culture have been some of the most blatant political uses of sports. Dyreson (2008) has detailed U.S. government plans to "Americanize the world through sport" beginning in the 1920s (p. 270). Using sports and American excellence on the international stage, the U.S. government first sought to spread the popularity of football, baseball and basketball but, because of a lack of interest in America's big three sports, eventually settled on swimming with star Johnny Weissmuller as the centerpiece of the campaign. The government hoped this plan would produce an increase in the manufacturing of U.S. sporting goods and sales abroad while also spreading America's influence around the globe; essentially cultural imperialism via sports.

The press has often worked with political interests and helped them to achieve their objectives. Despite America's failure to win the medal count at some of the earliest of the modern Olympic Games, American sportswriters had no trouble interpreting the results as American victories. Likewise, national mythologies such as the American refusal to dip the flag to any head of state during the Olympic parade could not have been sustained for so many years without the media's complicity. Dyreson's (2008) work demonstrates the political co-opting of sports, the media's role in this process, and its varying but noteworthy effects on the reach, power and standing of sports in the public domain.

### **The Television Era.**

Two precursors to the television era in the sports-media complex merit mention. The first is the newsreel. Some of the very first motion pictures included news films before the actual motion picture began but the true newsreel, about 10 minutes in length complete with a variety of news footage and released twice a week to theaters, was launched in 1911 (Fielding, 1972). Sound was added in the late 1920s. Because of the popularity of motion pictures, newsreels reached millions of people each week during their heyday. By the early 1930s newsreels were regularly including sports footage and by the end of that decade sports were a significant part of the newsreel's content (Oriard, 2001). Oriard describes newsreel coverage of football as the "early ancestor of ESPN's *SportsCenter*: highlights in which every game is a big game, every play a great play, every crowd wildly cheering" (p. 51). Television eventually replaced the newsreel but this early visual medium deserves credit for influencing television and its coverage of sports.

The second important precursor to the television era is *Sports Illustrated (SI)*. In addition to legitimizing sport and creating a blueprint for what American sports journalism should be, *SI* had a considerable influence on the television era. MacCambridge (1997) contends that the quality of sports journalism practiced at *SI* created a greater desire for televised games and allowed the magazine to set the agenda of just which sports were important, paving the way for television's takeover.

Shortly after television's arrival in the middle of the twentieth century, it quickly became the most powerful way to deliver sports to a large audience. Initial fears over television's potential to decrease all-important paid attendance at the stadium diminished

forever when the National Football League's (NFL) commissioner, Pete Rozelle, parlayed the growing popularity of professional football into a big-time television contract in 1964 (Davies, 2003; Gratton & Solberg, 2007). Since then professional sports have used television to expand their audience beyond those in the stadium, thus opening up new streams of capital. Television and sports would continue to discover how well their interests aligned as larger and larger television contracts provided sports leagues with considerable new revenue and its television partner with the best programming money could buy. The continuing desirability of sports programming to television lies in its unrivaled authenticity, its limited supply and its reliability in drawing audiences that are appealing to advertisers (Smart, 2005).

Corporate sponsorship, largely a product of the media's coverage of sports, provides sports with another key source of revenue. Essentially, companies pay to have their corporation, product or service associated with specific sports, teams or events. The economic influence created by the combination of television and sponsorship has led to changes in sports, both economic and cultural (Whannel, 1992). Corporate sponsorship, professional sports, and television have been described as an "indivisible trinity" (Smart, 2005, p. 144). The economic interests of the three have become so closely aligned and the relationship has reaped rewards for each so great that their union appears irreversible (Aris, 1990). Despite the involvement of sponsorship and television interests, Smart (2005) believes sports remain untarnished and continue to maintain their essence and appeal. He attributes this to our desire for what Daniel Boorstin described as "uncorrupted authenticity" (p. 18). Others prefer to say that sports have "manufactured authenticity" (Deuze, 2007, p. 240). As more stakeholders enter into the sports industry,

the ethical challenge becomes even greater for the contemporary sports journalist (Boyle, 2006a). More stakeholders whose overriding concern is favorable publicity and/or profit-making increases the opportunities for sports journalists to be faced with compromising journalistic ideals, such as objectivity, in their daily work and coverage.

The most significant development in the television era is the rise of the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN), particularly in the 1990s (Freeman, 2001; Evey & Broughton, 2004; Smith & Hollihan, 2009). The now renowned sports and entertainment empire created a whole new method of marketing and advertising to more specific demographics on cable and mixed journalism and entertainment in ways never before seen (Dunnavant, 1994). While many scoffed at the notion of such a cable network when it was launched in 1979, ESPN has become a cultural and economic powerhouse in both the sports and media worlds (Wood & Benigni, 2006; "Crying foul," 2008; Smith & Hollihan, 2009). Following on the heels of the enormous success of ESPN, regional sports networks (RSN) began to appear on U.S. cable systems in the late 1990s, mostly in major cities, based on the belief that ownership of popular content, namely the exclusive rights to a sports team's games, offers key competitive advantages. These RSNs own the rights to broadcast the games of the city's sports teams through contractual agreement or because they are jointly owned by the corporate ownership of the market's sports team(s). The exclusive coverage of these games sells cable or satellite subscriptions and attracts advertisers for the television entity while teams receive both revenue and publicity. The television revenues from these regional cable channels helped transform the traditional structures of sports (Whitson, 1998).

Televised sports are positioned at the intersection of light entertainment, journalism and drama (Whannel, 1992). It is this hybrid quality of sports television programming that is crucial to its success. The tensions and contradictions found within the production practices of televised sports are a result of the conflicts between these three television content typologies (Whannel). The sports journalism aspect uses reporting to tie it to the journalistic conventions of neutrality, impartiality, balance and objectivity. As Whannel puts it, sports television “is in this sense merely a special, ghettoized form of news” (p. 62). The entertainment element highlights the sport’s action, stars and drama in an attempt to attract and hold an audience. As Lowes (2000) clearly states, sports coverage must be entertaining above all else. However this feature of sports broadcasting is also the source of considerable criticism; critics say it is “a narrow and partial form of sports journalism” in which “selling the event has become an unfortunate by-product of sports mutation into television entertainment” (Boyle, 2006a, p. 174).

The transformation from sports event into television event has two organizing principles, realism and entertainment, which may potentially come into conflict at any given time (Whannel, 1992). In short, the better the game, the less the television production crew needs to be concerned with adding entertainment into the broadcast. Whannel explains this as the tenuous balancing of uncertainty and predictability for those in the world of sports television. Sports are by their very nature full of uncertainty, which is sometimes good and sometimes bad. Capitalism has a need to reduce the uncertainty of the sports commodity in order to ensure the presence of entertainment value (Whannel). The result of this is sports television’s “attempt to use the uncertainty of sports to win and hold an audience, while winning and holding the audience by ensuring that the promise

of entertainment can always be fulfilled” (Whannel, p. 190).

The institutional structure of the sports television industry establishes a framework that directs the production practices that take place within it. The various aspects of the structure determine the characteristics of these practices. In other words, the organizational culture of a sports television station may influence the ways in which it goes about producing television content. These organizational aspects may include the station’s departments and the division of labor, hierarchies, chains of command and accountability, rules and regulations, systems for the allocation of resources, the methods of decision-making, and relations with the external world outside of the institution or organization (Whannel, 1992). Each of these aspects may play a considerable role in structuring the production of sports television. For instance, the hierarchical status of the promotions department can influence production decisions; organizational rules and regulations may apply to everything from the standardization and use of graphics to the inclusion/exclusion and editing of stories; resources may be allocated based on a stated or unstated hierarchy among the sports teams a station covers; decisions may be made through collaboration at staff meetings or top down from news directors and executive producers; or a network/station’s relationship with various teams may influence the manner in which a story involving that team is covered. Institutional and organizational influence on the sports media must not be dismissed. As Silk, Slack and Amis (2000) observed, “institutional wisdom may not be made consciously but when decisions must be made with speed they are made against a subconscious frame of reference” (p. 159). In the deadline-driven sports television industry, this “institutional wisdom” plays a significant role in the production of sports media programming and texts.

### **The Digital Age.**

While television has been the dominant medium in the sports-media complex for the better part of the last five decades, the digital age has brought some competition with it. The development of the Internet and its accompanying new and social-networking media has garnered considerable popularity among sports fans and is transforming the sports-media complex again. Websites and blogs devoted to sports of all levels have proliferated, which has placed more pressure on sports journalists to capture the sports audience and has also led to more frequent reporting on rumor and gossip (Arango, 2008). While the democratizing power of the Internet can be easily overstated, it has allowed fans to create their own sports media. In some cases, fans are gaining access and privileges previously reserved for sports journalists, such as exclusive interviews with general managers (Ballard, 2006). In short, the digital era has resulted in the destabilization of traditional hierarchies in the sports media. However, these developments are resulting in athletes and teams becoming more and more cautious of the media, which places more distance between the athletes, those who cover them and the fans (Ballard).

Deuze (2007) describes the contemporary era of media work as “informational hypercapitalism” (p. 10). For Sennett (1998) surviving in this environment requires letting go of the past and accepting fragmentation and permanent change. Deuze locates contemporary media work in the “network society,” which not only refers to the increasingly networked nature of our social lives and but also our economy which revolves around understanding consumption (p. 15). The cultural and information industries play a crucial role in the network society, for they must spur consumption of



goods and services. Hesmondhalgh (2002) prefers entertainment or experience economy as a description of the contemporary economic period. Regardless of the reference, the sports media have an important role in our contemporary cultural and information industries.

As Rowe (1999) notes, sports media are well positioned for change: “the chameleonic capacity of contemporary media sport makes it a key aspect of the commodity cycle, its flexibility of form and use fitting perfectly contemporary requirements for speedy change and customization” (p. 70). Perhaps for the aforementioned reasons, the sports media are not easily categorized within the cultural and information industries. Hesmondhalgh (2002) describes sports as a borderline cultural industry, distinguishing it from other cultural industries because it is more authentic than scripted entertainment and because of its competitive nature. Deuze (2007) does not specifically discuss the sports media but does describe the industry fairly accurately in his discussions of the journalism and television industries. Essentially, this scholarship serves to further confirm the hybrid nature of sports television work.

Deuze (2005) summarizes the major challenges facing those in journalism as the need to acquire newsgathering and storytelling skills in a variety of media (also known as multiskilling), the imperative to incorporate digital technologies, and the need to emend their approach to the news producer-consumer relationship. Those who have devoted scholarly work to specific sports media such as the newspaper industry (Lowes, 2000) or sports television (Whannel, 1992) did not do so during the current digital age; thus, very little research particular to the defining characteristics of contemporary sports media work is available.

Convergence is a word invoked frequently in the contemporary media environment. It is safe to state that media professionals must accept technological convergence as a part of their work in the digital age. However, in addition to the convergence of media and technology, scholars have also noted the ability of convergence to improve management's control over media work (Deuze, 2007). Convergence affects four main facets of the mass media industries: content, relationships between producers and consumers of media, the structure of media companies, and how media professionals do their work (Deuze). As Deuze argues, convergence is "blurring the lines between production and consumption, between making media and using media, and between active or passive spectatorship of mediated culture" (p. 74).

Convergence has begotten the need for "multiskilling" in many newsrooms, essentially increasing the workloads of many media workers with no improvement in the resources allotted to them (Deuze, 2007, p. 142). Some journalists view multiskilling as a way to increase their versatility and, thus, as a form of professional enhancement (Chapman & Kinsey, 2009). Overall, scholars have shown that the contemporary media worker faces a less secure work situation, more responsibility and more autonomy (Hesmondhalgh, 2002; Deuze, 2007). Hesmondhalgh (2002) in particular has noted how those in the cultural industries work long hours under tough conditions and give up compensation and job security for creative autonomy. The potential negative effects of convergence spurred by technological developments were recognized back in the 1990s. Scholars noted the likelihood that journalists would be burdened with heavier workloads and pressures as a result of the expectations of working in a multimedia environment.

Perhaps the biggest concern was that the quality of journalism would suffer as the need to produce more news increased (Cottle & Ashton, 1999).

Some of the most identifiable features of the sports-media complex in the digital age include the Internet and its associated technologies and the role of celebrity and promotional cultures. The Internet is proving to be an ideal medium for the expansion of both promotional and celebrity culture. A celebrity culture is perhaps the most conspicuous feature of the contemporary sports-media complex. Celebrity culture is much more than a preoccupation with the famous, it is part of consumerism. Celebrity helps to drive our consumer culture and capitalism in several ways. First, celebrities promote individuality, a crucial aspect of both contemporary capitalist democracy and consumerism (Cashmore, 2006). What we consume and how we consume it have come to express who we are. In this way, celebrities represent our contemporary idols of consumption. According to Cashmore, in addition to promoting individuality, celebrities also serve the democratic illusion that anyone can achieve his or her dream.

Second, many fans follow celebrities with what can be described as a religious fervor. Such an avid fan following is an obvious attraction for the media industries. Third, celebrity acts as a common currency in the process of globalization. Athletes have become metaphors for globalization precisely because they belong to no particular territory and because of their potential for global popularity and appeal (Smart, 2005; Cashmore, 2006).

Rojek (2001) proposes that the celebrity phenomenon emerged as a consequence of the democratization of society, the decline of organized religion, and the commodification of everyday life. The Internet is often praised as a democratizing

medium because it offers everyone the opportunity to be heard and the ability to communicate with large numbers of people. Sports blogs are an excellent example of what some refer to as the democratization of the sports media. However, despite this notion of a more democratic sports media environment, others contend that while the rhetoric of viewer choice gets a lot of attention, ultimately we are not addressed as citizens but rather by our ability to pay for the consumption of new and not-so-new services (Boyle & Haynes, 2000). Critics also believe celebrity culture is problematic because the mass media give credence to and fuel unrealistic dreams of fame and fortune (Cashmore).

The Internet meshes nicely with consumer culture because the audience is both voyeur and performer; the consumer is not just an observer but a player, too (Cashmore, 2006). Put another way, “new media turns cultural consumption into forms of production” (Boyle and Haynes, 2000, p. 218). Once again, this may offer a false sense of empowerment and reinforces the notion of a democratization of society. The Internet also provides an ideal outlet for celebrity-driven content. As Cashmore (2006) describes it, “new media technologies rupture developments, opening up unanticipated opportunities for aspiring celebrities” (p. 258). While fans have long gravitated toward news and information about stars, the so-called paparazzi relatively recently discovered that fans cannot get enough of stories that delve into celebrities’ private and public lives (Cashmore). Such stories ignore what had been long-standing rules regarding what is off-limits; however, it should come as no surprise considering that traditional news values promote controversy, celebrity and revelation (Rowe, 1999). Sporting celebrities are also subject to gossip-style coverage, as evidenced by the launch of a TMZ website devoted

solely to athletes. Rumor and gossip have become a common currency in the sports media where the publication of innuendo is often good enough for other media outlets to publish or broadcast the information (Lowes, 2000).

Television is still an extremely relevant player in creating and sustaining sporting celebrities in the digital age. Television sport's development of its own star system connects it to entertainment practices (Whannel, 1992). According to Whannel, sports stars have three functions for television: as stars they are responsible for providing the entertainment in the performance; as personalities they provide the individualization and personalization through which audiences are won and held; and as characters they are central to the sporting narratives. According to some, sports stars achieve celebrity status mainly because of their authenticity (Cashmore, 2006; Smart, 2005). Rader (1984) believed that television would drain sports of its authenticity, but the contemporary television sports production style has actually contributed greatly to the transformation of athletes into celebrities (Smart, 2005).

In addition to celebrity culture, promotional culture is a second feature of the sports-media complex that continues to intensify in the digital age. The rise of the Internet and social-networking media greatly augments promotional culture. Athletes, fans and the sports media are using personal websites, blogs, *Twitter*, and *Facebook* for self-promotion more and more extensively. Furthermore, when individual self-promotion becomes a topic of public communication, it gives rise to the construction of celebrityhood, which is a promotional practice (Wernick, 1991). This blending of promotion, celebrity and the Internet illustrates the connectedness of promotional culture, the Internet and celebrity culture in the digital age.

Contemporary culture is characterized by a neverending cycle of promotional messages, or, as Wernick (1991) puts it, “it is if we are in a hall of mirrors” (p. 121). Promotion is often referred to in terms of a circuit because, as Whitson (1998) explains, “there are no obvious starting points and endpoints, but rather recursive and mutually reinforcing public texts that generate more visibility and more business for all concerned” (p. 67). This state of promotional culture indicates a significant transformation in our capitalist system, which Wernick (1991) attributes to globalization and the intensification of commodity production. This advanced capitalist stage has two defining features: (1) the timing of the distribution, circulation and exchange of mass produced and mass marketed products and services garner strategic attention equal to the technical improvements in production necessary for profitability and growth; and (2) promotion has become such a high-level concern that the product or service is created with promotion in mind which means that promotion affects the product or service in every detail of its production. In short, Marx’s base and superstructure become indistinguishable. As Miede (1979) puts it, “we are witnessing on the one hand the promotion of culture by commerce and on the other the promotion of commerce by culture” (p. 310).

## **The Reporter-Source Relationship**

Reporters can be said to be located where the cultural and economic elements meet. The reporter is responsible for gathering newsworthy information and packaging information into a desirable commodity for an audience's consumption. The reporter's ability to do this largely hinges on his or her ability to gain access to and cultivate sources of information. Just as sports and the media have a relationship of interdependence, so too do the reporter and his or her information source. It can be argued that the news is largely determined by the ability of sources to create appropriate and acceptable news (Molotch & Lester, 1974). A variety of other factors must also be taken into consideration. The reporter's newsgathering and interactions with sources is a complicated social process and perhaps the most crucial facet of the production of news. The selection of sources and the questions asked do not only affect the story itself but may also shape the outcome (Strentz, 1978). Little has been done to discern the myriad of cultural, organizational and institutional factors that play a role in the reporter-source relationship. Manning (2001) cautions, "the task of a sociology of news and news sources is to trace the sources of order and control without reducing or essentializing a complex social reality" (p. 48).

The reporter-source relationship is one of interdependence and is based on the notion that the relationship is mutually beneficial for both parties; however, it is equally marked by the tension over control of and access to all-important information. At its most basic level the reporter-source relationship is an exchange that provides the reporter with the information necessary to do his or her job and the source with the opportunity to promote a specific point of view or image. Cynics might say the two sides simply use

each other. According to Malcolm (1990), however, the tension between the source's blind self-promotion and the reporter's skepticism gives journalism its authenticity and vitality. The reporter-source interaction and interview is also an "exchange of behavior" (Stewart and Cash, 1994, p. 3). Because of the two-way nature of this relationship, the interview is an often imperfect form of communication that is subject to all of the issues involved in interpersonal communication, both verbal and nonverbal (Hall, Nichols, Moynahan & Taylor, 2007). In short, it is a complex social dynamic.

Sometimes the reporter-source relationship develops into or borders on friendship, which further complicates matters (Rosten, 1974). Determining the proper stance of the reporter toward his or her source is perhaps the trickiest issue to navigate in journalism (Strentz, 1978). Rosten (1974) has discussed the need for a relationship between reporter and source best described as cordial. Complexity arises out of other external influences on the relationship as well. These may include organizational influences, alternative sources and reporters, audience perceptions, and the competence of and confidence in the reporter-source relationship (Nimmo, 1964). Nimmo classified reporter-source interactions into three categories: cooperative, compatible and competitive. Institutional factors may also determine just what news is gathered and how it is reported to the public. These include the definition of news, the rational nature of news and the prejudgment of newsworthy events (Strentz, 1978).

Reporters are driven to cultivate relationships with sources they can count on to provide a reliable and consistent flow of information. Reporters often desire quotes from sources. Quotes inject color, they accentuate and add credibility to stories. Even if what is said is dull or a cliché, a reporter must normally get quotes from the principals of a story



(Lowes, 2000). Journalists often look to sources for interpretation and ideas as well (Chittick, 1970). In the hypercompetitive environment of journalism, reporters most desire sources who can provide a tip or a scoop. This often occurs in the form of so-called leaks. Savvy reporters may play one source against another in order to procure a piece of information not intended for public release. The experienced reporter always looks for sources who are dissatisfied and sometimes will even play on the vanity of the source or leaker (Chittick).

Whereas the primary function of the journalist is getting valuable information to the citizenry, the source operates in self-interest or in the interest of an individual, company or organization they represent. Sources see themselves as providers of information that promote their interests or publicize their agendas or ideas (Gans, 2004). Journalists must develop an ability to read media relations/public information personnel as well as other sources because if the source has a vested interest in the issue or situation the journalist must look elsewhere for the story (Nimmo, 1964). It should come as no surprise, then, that journalists tend to assume a hierarchy of credibility among information sources (Manning, 2001).

While we often speak of a reporter's access to sources, a source's access to reporters is also a consideration and is shaped by at least four interrelated factors: (1) the source's incentive to provide information; (2) the power a source possesses, which is generally a product of his or her position; (3) the ability to supply suitable information; and (4) the geographic and social proximity to the reporter (Gans, 2004). Journalists must determine the suitability of available sources, which is ultimately a judgment call based on a number of interrelated considerations: the source's past suitability, productivity,

reliability, trustworthiness, authoritativeness and ability to articulate concisely and dramatically (Gans). The persistent pattern by which reporters use a limited number of the same types of sources is simultaneously shaped by the ability of sources to gain access to journalists, a source's suitability and the relationships between reporters and their sources (Gans).

The organizational demand to meet deadlines in the journalism profession is, however, the main reason for the reliance upon routine, dependable sources. While most reporters would prefer to not depend on officials and/or official spokespersons, they ultimately become the overwhelming choice as reporters' main sources of information and, thus, the primary definers of topics (Sigal, 1973; Manning, 2001). Public relations professionals, sometimes referred to as spin doctors or image consultants, have grown exponentially in importance in just the last couple of decades (Manning). The increase in media outlets and their demand for access to sources and information has, in large part, spurred the rise of this orchestrated communication. It has been estimated that between half and three quarters of all news content is public-relations driven, which is indicative of a promotional culture (Manning). According to Manning, the dependence on public relations personnel is partly the result of the increase in the number of reporters who do a large portion of their work from behind a desk and partly because generalization is overtaking specialization among reporters. The bottom line, however, is that public relations professionals are most effective for their organizations in those situations where reporters are most dependent upon them, meaning they have no one else to acquire the information from for a story (Manning).

From the media's perspective, the media relations or public information official

should make the reporter's job easier through a keen understanding of how the media thinks and formats its content (Lowes, 2000). However, the way in which media relations professionals control information is making the reporters' jobs increasingly difficult, which has been noted to be particularly true for the sports reporter (Chapman & Kinsey, 2009). This coincides with the rise of powerful transnational corporations or other organizations that have shown an ability to control information flow effectively for several reasons (Manning, 2001). First, awareness of the current media environment has motivated such corporations and organizations to formalize and strengthen their media practices. Second, they possess the ability to exert sanctions – such as firing – over employees who leak information. Furthermore, the fear that the company or organization could be damaged by such activities is also a common consideration for employees who might be thinking about leaking information. The shared interests of corporate elites can also prevent the circulation of information.

Corporations have other methods of influencing the information that reaches our mass media. While Manning (2001) asserts that complete corporate control of information is not possible, he does not directly address the interference with journalistic autonomy that may result from corporate ownership of media outlets. Plenty of stories exist of media moguls who have used their companies to promote their political views. Curran (1990) has coined the phrase “licensed autonomy” to describe journalistic independence in such ownership scenarios, stating that “journalists are allowed to be independent only as long as their independence is exercised in a form that conforms to the requirements of their employing organization” (p. 120). Negative stories are not necessarily avoided, however, because they can advertise objectivity and help to distract

from other compromised coverage (Hesmondhalgh, 2002). Hesmondhalgh concludes that owner intervention into the work of journalists is relatively rare, but such stories do serve to remind us “autonomy is never irrevocable” (p. 165). Furthermore, even if journalists work autonomously of owners, their work is still governed by organizational or institutional requirements and routines. In Gitlin’s (1997) view, self-censorship is the greatest concern. The danger is that journalists are influenced by a corporate culture to the degree that they fail to pursue certain stories or angles that might conflict with corporate interests. As far as Schudson (2003) is concerned, the amount of entertainment found in the news signals that marketplace values have encroached into the traditional values of journalists.

Because of the importance and difficulty of maintaining access to reliable sources, reporters often become dependent on them. Reporters cannot afford to alienate sources by writing negative stories that displease them (Gans, 2004). This requires journalists to use their sources and the information gathered from them with discretion. Deciding whether or not to publish a story may involve difficult decisions; however, there are stories that rise to a level of importance that leave a reporter with no choice (Rosten, 1974). The propensity for reliance is crucial because it increases the likelihood that a reporter becomes more of a spokesperson for the source rather than a neutral party (Sigal, 1973). Sports reporters often complain that they are compelled to pander to the interests of their sources because of this untenable situation (Lowes, 2000). However, reporters are not without resources themselves. They often possess information they can trade with those they interact with. Thus, reporters are continuously bargaining with sources who hold most of the power, and newsgathering becomes a series of compromises brokered by both

sides (Sigal, 1973).

A healthy amount of skepticism is required of journalists in their dealings with all sources since the majority of sources only release information that is going to promote their agenda. Sources fiercely guard negative information. It is for this reason that the tension between reporter and media relations sources is so palpable (Lowes, 2000). Journalists must question why the source is taking the time to provide information. A source's motive may be to curry favor with the media, to promote their interests, to expose conflict for more selfish reasons or to launch a trial balloon, which is the releasing of information for the sole purpose of gauging public reaction to it (Nimmo, 1964; Chittick, 1970; Rosten, 1974). As Lowes (2000) has described it, the reporter-source relationship truly is a dance.

Sources are often grouped into the two categories: "sympathetic" or "hostile" (Manning, 2001, p. 152). When sources are displeased with the stories written by journalists for any number of reasons, their most effective sanction is cutting off access, for sources can always find another reporter to provide information to. However, sources rarely cut reporters off completely. As Gans (2004) explains, "Journalists choose stories rather than sources so the powerful sources are sometimes unhappy with how journalists report them, they would be unhappier still were they not major news sources in the first place" (p. 282). Thus, any cutting off of access usually does not last for an extended period of time. Nonetheless, beat reporters have an acute fear of losing access to their sources (Lowes, 2000). If a source manages to play upon this fear and dissuade a reporter from writing a potentially troublesome story, the source has succeeded in wielding some dominion over what becomes news. When sources recognize their value to reporters, they

can also exploit the relationship in order to reap the benefits of media coverage (Lowes, 2000).

In addition to the issues above, other pitfalls – both ethical and legal – complicate the reporter’s relationship with sources. These issues include deception, misrepresentation, the use of anonymous sources and privacy (Goodwin & Smith, 1994; Black, Steele, & Barney, 1995; Cohen & Elliott, 1997; Keeble, 2001). Professional codes of conduct counsel journalists to be fair and respectful of sources. Some newsroom codes directly address the use of impersonation, entrapment and criminal methods, which fall under the umbrella of deception (Cohen & Elliott, 1997). An ethical consideration that borders on both misrepresentation and deception, as Janet Malcolm (1990) famously put it, involves the journalist as a thief:

Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible. He is a kind of confidence man, preying on people’s vanity, ignorance, or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse. Like the credulous widow who wakes up one day to find the charming young man and all her savings gone, so the consenting subject of a piece of nonfiction writing learns – when the book or article appears – his hard lesson. Journalists justify their treachery in various ways according to their temperaments. The more pompous talk about freedom of speech and “the public’s right to know”; the least talented talk about Art; the seemliest murmur about earning a living (p.1).

Some believe journalists should remind inexperienced news sources how the game is played. Goodwin and Smith (1994) argue that such compassion is a crucial trait for journalists. Others protest that such an approach runs counter to the ideal of objective reporting; compassion could weaken their fortitude and allow them to forget their first obligation to keep the public informed with truthful information. Still others contend compassion could get in the way of the competitive pressures of journalism and landing the big story. According to Goodwin and Smith (1994), dealing with people with respect

will win the respect of not only sources but news consumers as well. “No one wants a complaisant press that avoids controversy and ignores wrongdoing, but that does not mean we cannot have a compassionate press that shows respect for people and avoids causing needless pain” (p. 329).

The reporter-source relationship is further complicated when a source does not want to be named or does not want a conversation or part of a conversation to be on the record. A journalist should have a compelling reason for withholding a source’s identity. Some reporters have engaged in the questionable practice of creating a fake identification for a source in order to conceal his or her identity (Hoyt, 1999). Identifying news sources allows the audience to evaluate stories based on their content and the source’s motive for giving the interview (Cohen & Elliott, 1997). Naming sources also instills confidence in the public about the journalism profession and the quality of information provided. However, there are ethical justifications – such as preventing either physical or emotional harm to a source, protecting the privacy of a source, particularly children and violent crime victims, or encouraging the coverage of highly insulated and private institutions such as the Supreme Court or the military – for granting anonymity. Sources possessing sensitive and important information would not risk their career or physical well-being without this protection (Cohen & Elliott). The more significant the event or situation, the more likely is the use of anonymous attribution (Blankenburg, 1992). Others insist more broadly that anonymous sources help to improve the diversity of thought in the marketplace of ideas and the criticism of those in positions of power (Blankenburg).

Reporters use anonymous sources because they think an anonymous source is better than none at all or because they don’t have time to find a source to go on-the-

record (Goodwin & Smith, 1994). Worse reasons for granting anonymity include reporters rushing to get a story first, attempting to give the story a sexier feel or just plain laziness (Shepard, 1994; Cohen & Elliott, 1997). If journalists choose to use anonymous sources in a story, the least they should do is provide a clue as to where the information is coming from as well as possible motivations for the revealing of the information. More stringent rules require that the information be documented elsewhere before incorporating it into a story (Shepard). Others suggest asking two questions before using such information: “Is this truly important?” And, “Is this the only way for this to become known?” (Brown, 2005, p. 56). The answer should be yes to both questions. Still others insist the focus needs to be on the import and accuracy of the story when deciding on the use of unnamed sources (Robertson, 2002).

Anonymous sources fall into several categories: *not for attribution* refers to when the source is veiled; *on background* applies to information from a source given as an aid for placing facts in context or to get other sources to give the same information on-the-record; and *off-the-record* or *on deep background* strictly means the source cannot be quoted and the knowledge may not be used in questioning other sources. Less strict interpretations allow reporters to use the information when questioning other sources but under no conditions can they reveal the identity of the source (Cohen & Elliott, 1997). Many editors tell journalists to leave the room in such situations, but some contend such information allows reporters to gain a higher degree of analytic knowledge (Blankenburg, 1992). Off-the-record information should only be agreed to concerning a story of the utmost importance.



Part of the problem with these terms, or rituals of confidentiality, is that they do not have consistent meanings (Goodwin & Smith, 1994). This lack of agreement has caused considerable antagonism between reporters and sources over the years (Sigal, 1973). Pitfalls involving such confidential arrangements abound. The reporter must constantly be aware of the likelihood that sources who “leak” stories under conditions of anonymity are doing so for their own purposes; whether the story is important enough to warrant coverage is an editorial judgment call. In short, the truthfulness of anonymous source information must always be questioned. While anonymous sources have been described as “part of the thrill and romance of journalism,” the acceptance of anonymous sources may also invite reporters to make up sources or quotes (Brown, 2005, p. 56). The most high-profile case is Janet Cooke’s Pulitzer Prize-winning story, “Jimmy’s World,” about an eight-year-old heroin addict, which still haunts *The Washington Post* (Shepard, 1994). Confidentiality arrangements between reporters and sources can damage the credibility of the journalism profession. Although research has shown readers are no more likely to distrust a story with unnamed sources, news based upon anonymous sources is more likely to be inaccurate, incomplete or misleading (Goodwin & Smith).

Reporters also risk losing credibility with sources if they break their promise of confidentiality with them. This type of activity could lead to sources becoming reluctant to give journalists valuable information. It can also lead to lawsuits. *Cohen v. Cowles Media Co.*, 501 U.S. 663 (1991) is the most significant case regarding a confidentiality agreement between reporters and sources. The Supreme Court ruled that the First Amendment does not prohibit a source from recovering damages for a newspaper’s broken promise of confidentiality given in exchange for information (Rothenberg, 1999).

The Court decided that a promise of anonymity in exchange for information constitutes a contract between reporter and source that should not be broken. The media feared a major increase in suits based on this legal precedent; however, very few cases have relied on this decision to date (Martin, 1996).

Most reporters protect the identity of their anonymous sources fiercely, even risking jail time by refusing to testify even when subpoenaed. Again the major concern is that if a lack of trust develops between sources and reporters, the free flow of information will decrease significantly or, worse yet, stop. *Branzburg v. Hayes*, 408 U.S. 665 (1972) is another key Supreme Court decision regarding reporters' confidentiality agreements. In this case the Court ruled 5-to-4 that newspaper reporters are not entitled, under the First Amendment, to claim immunity from testifying about information obtained through a promise of confidentiality (Cohen & Elliott, 1997). However, since the ruling, some states have enacted shield laws that provide protection for journalists should they and their unnamed sources end up in court. Currently 36 states and the District of Columbia offer full protection, four states offer partial protection while 16 states have no form of shield law ("A Guide to," 2009). Indiana Congressman Mike Pence (R) has been pushing for a federal shield law, but none has been adopted (Nordenson, 2007).

The privacy of both public and private figures is another journalistic issue that has become increasingly relevant in the contemporary media environment. Journalistic rules for dealing with public figures have undergone significant changes since the first half of the twentieth century. Sabato (1991) details the evolution of the press beginning with the "lapdog" era of the 1940s until 1966. What he refers to as the Rooseveltian rule for press coverage states that the private life of a public figure should stay private and undisclosed

unless it seriously compromises his or her public performance. In many instances not even this type of activity brought about publication, and journalists were willing participants in the “institutionalized hypocrisy” (Sabato, 1991, p. 39). The press’ love affair with John F. Kennedy and unwillingness to report his numerous personal indiscretions is the epitome of a lapdog press. Some contend the press may have only been doing what the public wanted – preserving their myths and heroes.

Between 1966 and 1974, the press developed more of a “watchdog” mentality regarding the private lives of public figures. Sabato (1991) believes the moment that most contributed to this change was the Chappaquiddick incident. In July of 1969, the body of Mary Jo Kopechne was discovered underwater inside Senator Ted Kennedy’s car just off of Chappaquiddick Island in Massachusetts. After the car and body were discovered Kennedy told police Kopechne was his passenger when he accidentally drove his car off a bridge and into the water. The incident quickly became a national scandal. While Kennedy pleaded guilty to a charge of leaving the scene of an accident after causing injury, journalists began to be of the mindset that they could not ignore someone’s private life or character traits. This new rule opened up essentially every aspect of private life since anything could potentially be relevant to a public figure’s performance. This even extended to unproved rumor and innuendo. Sports journalists began to follow the same rules, especially following the publication of Jim Bouton’s *Ball Four* in 1970. The former Major League Baseball pitcher gave fans a no-holds-barred peek into the lives of professional athletes including details of their many vices and unattractive dealings and opened the door for more critical coverage of players’ off-the-field lives. Sports journalism historian Dave Kaszuba (2008) argues that the effect of *Ball Four*’s

humanizing of athletes is still being felt today. Prior to Bouton's salacious book, most sports journalists had long adhered to a policy of not writing about athletes' personal lives unless they end up in the police blotter or their actions affect on-field play (Sokolove, 1996; Plaschke, 2000).

The "junkyard dog" era (1974 to present) emerged from the watchdog period. Even more combative, it operates on the rule that anything goes (Sabato, 1991, p. 46). The contemporary media have become more aggressive in response to the increasing image consciousness of public figures and those who surround them. Journalists' jobs have become more difficult and the competition more fierce. The American media "feeding frenzy" is now a global one. An increase in the violation of legitimate privacy rights has been the result (Sabato, 1991). Perhaps the most publicized case concerning the privacy of a public figure involves Arthur Ashe and his 1992 announcement he had contracted HIV. *USA Today's* decision to report the story forced Ashe to call a press conference and announce he was HIV positive. While Ashe had remained in the public eye as an activist, television commentator and journalist, many argued that the illness was not a public issue (Laucella, 2009). Those who defended *USA Today's* actions claimed the story was news due in large part to the status of AIDS at the time; thus, the paper had an obligation to print it (Goodwin & Smith, 1994). While the media faced heavy criticism for its overzealousness to report on the story, Ashe's case did provide an opportunity for journalists to openly debate the issue of privacy and how it should be handled.

The Supreme Court has set a precedent for cases involving privacy. *Time, Inc. v. Hill*, 385 U.S. 374 (1967), saw the Court apply the Sullivan "actual malice" standard in a "false light" privacy case in overturning a judgment in favor of the private figure. In

*Gertz v. Robert Welch, Inc.*, 410 U.S. 323 (1974), the Court established a new standard for defamation claims brought by private individuals stating that “actual malice” was too stringent for private people. At minimum private figures must now prove the defendant acted negligently (Cohen & Elliott, 1997). Of course, the truth has always been the best defense for defendants in such cases. Others believe the privacy of an individual should only be violated if it is of “overriding public importance” and that individual harm should override the need for public knowledge when someone’s dignity is at stake (Hodges, 1994, p. 203). As journalist Jonathan Alter puts it, ‘We have to draw a distinction between the right to do something and the right thing to do’ (Alderman & Kennedy, 1997, p. 27).

The review of literature on the reporter-source relationship reveals this relationship as a highly complex form of interpersonal communication, contingent upon a number of cultural, social, psychological, and behavioral factors. Institutional and organizational factors also contribute to this complexity. This raises questions of action or agency versus structure. Giddens’ (1984) theory of structuration is useful here, holding that all human action is performed within a pre-existing, specific, social structure, which is both enabling and constraining. According to Giddens, while human agency is governed to some degree by the contextual rules under which it occurs in a specific historical moment, human agents are equipped with certain resources and may either sustain or change the structure and rules. As Manning (2001) describes it, “Central to the study of news sources is an understanding of the way in which both structures and dynamic social practices shape the flows of information and the needs of the news organisations” (p. 49). While researchers have investigated the reporter-source

relationship in (political) journalism, very little scholarly research has examined this relationship and its ramifications specifically in the sports-media complex.

### **The Reporter-Source Relationship in Sports Journalism.**

Scholarly study of the reporter-source relationship has focused almost exclusively on mainstream journalism. While parallels can be drawn between the reporter-source dynamic in sports journalism and mainstream journalism, both professions are constantly evolving and differ in significant ways. A review of the existing literature shows that sports journalism possesses characteristics of mainstream journalism; however, it can also be distinguished from it through numerous departures. In this way sports journalism is a hybrid, and its distinct routines and norms require their own investigation. Furthermore, the little work done on the reporter-source relationship in sports journalism provides additional evidence that it must be examined through its own unique lens. Few researchers and scholars have approached it in this way. Mark Douglas Lowes (2000) *Inside the Sports Pages* is one of the few significant works in sports journalism. It examines the routines, ideologies and manufacture of sports news. More scholarship exists from a European perspective, but the differences between the cultural, economic, political, and legal situations of the two make wholesale transferability problematic. However, a historical review of works written by those within the profession helps reveal some of the unique traits and issues of the reporter-source relationship in sports journalism. Sportswriters from as far back as the “golden age of sport” in the 1920s have noted the unique difficulties and demands of the sports journalism profession (Gallico, 1938; Holtzman, 1973; Farr, 1975; Breslin, 1991; Fountain, 1993; Harper, 1999).

Lowes (2000) identified two routine sources of information: major league sports organizations and their senior staff and personal contacts on a reporter's given beat. Sources within the major league sports organizations include media relations staffers. They issue press releases, hold news conferences and provide various other services with the goal of obtaining regular and extensive media coverage, which acts as what Lowes refers to as "publicity-as-news" (p. 12). The press conference has become a staple of sports franchises and their media relations departments for dealing with the large number of media that characterizes much of contemporary sports coverage. The substantial group of media clamoring to get their questions answered combined with the lack of personal interaction makes the press conference scenario one of the most difficult interview situations for reporters (Hall et al., 2007). Furthermore, Chapman and Kinsey (2009) note that sports reporters are more likely than other journalists to have no choice when it comes to their contacts.

Personal contacts on the reporter's regular beat are often referred to as "inside sources." In addition to athletes and coaches, inside sources may include individuals such as trainers and equipment managers, front-office staff, agents and league and team executives. Regular beat contacts provide more innuendo and rumor than straight news; however, the contemporary sports media commonly publishes or airs rumors (Lowes, 2000). Critics believe the supreme journalistic value of objectivity may be compromised by such consistent and close proximity to sources. Hall of Fame sportswriter Frank Deford (2010) has likened the reporter-source relationship to "two people on a high school date, and it's not just the reporter who's doing the flirting" (p. 62). Some newspaper executives have instituted the practice of changing sports reporters' beats in

order to avoid the hazards that come with spending so much time covering the same team (Pollack, 2003).

The reporter-source relationship is contingent on the source's perception of the reporter's coverage, which means the reporter is always in a precarious position. Sources who understand their value may sanction reporters for any coverage they perceive as negative. One type of sanction is physical. Episodes of players and coaches accosting reporters are not uncommon. Many a sports journalist has described a harrowing visit to the locker room following their writing of a critical story (Lincicome, 1990; Sokolove, 1996; Plaschke, 2000; Boyle, 2006a). The second type of sanction – the cutting off of access – is more effective. Without information and quotes from the biggest names, a reporter's story lacks an essential element of the ideal sports media product. In other words, if a source refuses to talk to a reporter, the reporter will eventually find it difficult to do his or her job.

The difficulty of developing and maintaining relationships with athletes and coaches has been illustrated in the many recollections and accounts written by sports journalists since the rise of the contemporary sports-media complex. As famed sportswriter Jimmy Cannon put it, the average player views the reporter as a spy. He further describes it as a “cop-and-crook relationship” – adversarial, because reporters are not supposed to be a fan or a friend to those they cover even though many have violated this unwritten rule (Holtzman, 1973, p. 277). Some of the issues reporters face in navigating this pitfall include regularly dealing with off-the-record information and details that organizations and players ask them to keep secret. Sports reporters have also charged that athletes have a general lack of desire to communicate and that they



sometimes play favorites with whom they share information (Bloom, 1988). Others have spoken of the challenge of getting athletes to open up when they feel terrible, physically and/or emotionally (Eskenazi, 2003).

Sports journalists also contribute their fair share of issues to the reporter-source dynamic. Some have pointed out that most sports reporters never compete in sports at an elite level, which is an issue because they can't relate to the athlete's perspective (Holtzman, 1973). Sports reporters must also interact with some of the very sports figures they are fans of or grew up idolizing. Sports reporters have said it takes years to become comfortable interviewing and writing about celebrities and other figures they were enamored with before breaking into sports journalism (Eskenazi, 2003).

Dwindling access to players, coaches and franchises in general is perhaps the biggest problem facing today's sports reporter (Rowe, 1999; Lowes, 2000; Boyle, 2006a). Coaches and players perceive contemporary sports reporting as overly negative. Hostility and antagonism have grown between the two sides, creating distrust and frustration (Hill, 1980; Cavanagh, 1991). Both athletes and sportswriters have acknowledged a growing gap. A study from the Center for the Study of Sport in Society (2004) advised that the only way to bridge this gap is for both sides to get beyond the stereotypes they both have of each other.

According to sports journalists, athletes have to understand that no matter their relationship with the player, reporters or columnists still owe it to their audience to write about it when players perform poorly. Some have noted a conflation of criticism and negativism by athletes and coaches, saying that they have an inaccurate notion of what critical is (Cavanagh, 1991). Athletes must understand they are public figures and accept

the responsibilities that come with superstar status even if they do not openly seek the notoriety (Consoli, 1982). Some believe that professional athletes are beginning to develop arrogant attitudes as early as college or even high school (Wolper, 1997). Conversely, athletes say the demands made on them are impossible ones; they are held up as role models and heroes, but media coverage privileges the negative over the positive (Strout, 1992). All of these factors contribute to a worsening reporter-source relationship in sports journalism.

The natural environment of almost all reporter-source interaction is the locker room. The locker room has been referred to as “hostile turf” because athletes view the media as irritants and look for ways to avoid contact with them (Sokolove, 1996, p. 18). Sportswriter Michael Sokolove (1996) identified several reasons for the worsening conditions that are specific to the sports world. First is the money. Players used to try to cultivate a positive relationship with reporters in order to garner the benefits of positive publicity. They believed this would lead to larger contracts from management. However, salaries and incentives appear to be less contingent upon a positive public image. Second is the crush of media that fills the locker room and the athlete’s daily existence. The Internet and sports talk radio have only heightened this media intensity. Finally, casual contact between reporters and players has dwindled considerably, making the locker room the only real venue where the reporter can gather information. Sokolove also claims differences between the two groups are only exacerbated by the continuously growing salary differential between them.

Longtime sportswriter Leonard Koppett (1981) enumerated a host of changes that have affected locker room policies and in turn the reporter-source relationship in sports.

Koppett blamed the growing number of cameras and audio-recording devices, the presence of female journalists, the increased power athletes have over their careers and affairs, the general disdain for the media among athletes as well as society, the growth of television, a less aggressive group of sports reporters and the development of media-relations professionals. As further evidence of this growing gap between reporters and athletes, Christopher Walsh (2006) in his book about sports writing claims he has never truly gotten to know any athlete he's written about.

Sports franchises' improving media savvy has added another layer of complexity to the reporter-source relationship. Teams long ago began the practice of coaching their players on how best to interact with the media, which is to say, keep it positive or don't say anything at all (Hill, 1980). The exponential growth of media attention to athletes and teams has many reporters bemoaning the change from the time when nothing was off the record in the locker room. In many professional and even collegiate sports, practices and facilities are tightly guarded, as is access to athletes and even coaches (Pollack, 2005). Injuries and the playing status of specific athletes are some of the most closely guarded information a team possesses, and questions from the media that revolve around such subjects are rarely met with a substantive response (Pollack, 2003). Windows of interview availability for sports journalists have been winnowed to less than an hour in some instances, increasing the pressure and difficulty of the sportswriter's job (Hall, Nichols, Moynahan & Taylor, 2007). Most every professional sports franchise has developed similar policies and procedures. Management's exertion of this type of control inevitably leads to the disgruntlement of reporters who are unable to gain the access necessary to write the types of stories their media outlets desire.

A look at the interview in the world of sports shows that visiting a locker room was not high on the sports reporter's to-do list until relatively recently. The games were the story and the reporter's analysis gathered from his seat in the press box was sufficient for his newspaper's desired coverage. The sports reporter's main source of information was the coach, who generally wore many hats including the role of media relations director and team spokesperson. Because the coach was the only source of information for a team, the press naturally cultivated a friendly relationship with him or her (Oriard, 2001). Reporters used information and quotes from other sources sparingly. When quotes were printed, they were generally printed verbatim. The naturalization of the use of interviews resulted, at some point, in quotes being edited. This has led to the potential for the words of players and coaches to be written and/or taken out of context, which has frayed more than a few reporter-source relationships over the years. Radio and eventually television gave the fan the same view as those in the press box. The editorial assumption became that the majority of the readership had seen the game, so the philosophy shifted to the notion that reporters could best gather interesting insights by talking to players and coaches after games (Pollack, 2003). Interviewing in the locker room also remains a favored practice because it allows reporters to capture the immediacy of the event (Creedon, 1994).

Sports reporters have noted that interviewing athletes and coaches is an acquired skill that can take years to master (Eskenazi, 2003). Further complicating the lines of questioning that reporters feel obligated to ask are queries involving rumor and gossip, which have reached new heights in terms of their relevance in contemporary sports news. The popularity and reach of sports talk radio along with the advent of various

incarnations of sports information on the Internet have only magnified rumor and gossip's prominence. Furthermore, the use of other communication technologies such as cell phones coupled with the Internet has intensified the media's monitoring of athletes, often via fans (Sanderson, 2009). The increased surveillance of athletes' personal lives and the heightened scrutiny they face, which includes rumor and gossip, has served to further erode the reporter-source relationship.

To a certain degree, sports teams and franchises at both the professional and amateur levels have taken to moving a portion of reporter-athlete/coach interaction out of the locker room and into more benign areas where press conferences are held. This relatively recent change may be occurring for several reasons. Press conferences allow teams to accommodate larger numbers of journalists, remove at least some of the issues associated with interviewing in the hyper-masculine domain of the locker room and give the athlete/coach more control over the interaction. Sports information/media relations officials oversee such events and often place limits on who asks the questions, the number of questions asked, and what is or is not acceptable to ask about. Clayman and Heritage (2002) note an important difference between the numbers of media involved with an interview as opposed to a press conference. The participation of numerous reporters significantly changes the conditions of interaction by reducing the opportunity of each reporter to ask follow-up questions. This serves to take pressure off of the source while also allowing the source to pursue his or her own agenda during the course of the interaction. In essence it is much less effective for making interviewees accountable for their words or actions.

An examination of changes in American sportswriting, in terms of style and

editorial philosophy, reveals the importance of the reporter-source relationship to the content of sports coverage. As Sokolove (1996) has noted, “The deterioration in player-press relations cannot be separated from the revolution in the content of the sports pages” (p. 22). The coverage of sports first showed up in the early to mid-nineteenth century in the form of a weekly magazine called the *American Turf Register and Sporting Magazine* published by John Stuart Skinner (Berryman, 1976). However, the sports page did not begin to truly flourish until after World War I, which ushered in the previously described “gee whiz” and “aw shucks” eras. A more significant shift to an even more legitimate form of journalism began in the late 1960s, according to a former Associated Press general sports editor (Huenergard, 1979). The new breed of young and aggressive sportswriters that altered the face and reputation of sports journalism was referred to as “chipmunks” (Huenergard). They were known for challenging sources with rude questions. These sportswriters enjoyed conflict more than the game they were covering and tried to uncover as much conflict within sports franchises and leagues as possible. The form of journalism practiced by the “chipmunks” has also been referred to as “gotcha” journalism (Eskenazi, 2003). Jimmy Cannon derisively said chipmunks preferred Jim Bouton to Mickey Mantle because he was a controversial figure who gave good interviews (Huenergard).

It has become hard to ignore the increasing attention that scandal, rumor and gossip command in today’s sports media, a clear indicator of the newest approach to sports coverage (Boyle, 2006a; Lowes, 2000). The chipmunks were the precursor to the fourth estate mentality that would dominate sports departments following the Watergate scandal. It did not just apply to hard news; sports reporters also became more antagonistic

and investigative in their methods (Koppett, 2003). While perhaps less antagonistic and investigative today, contemporary sportswriters must now be capable of covering hard news and business stories in sports when once these types of stories were given to hard news reporters. Some papers now even assign reporters full-time to covering sports news that takes place off the field, including such topics as gambling and franchise finances (Weiner, 2003). Many argue that sports journalists are not capable of investigative reporting because either the field is too new or their experience in this area is too limited (Weiner). Since the turn to this style, sports journalists have been charged with focusing too much on what athletes and coaches perceive as negative stories. At the same time the sports journalism profession continues to battle the perception within journalism that its content is simply cheerleading for the teams and athletes it covers. However, categorizing the sports journalism profession into one or the other, boosterism or cynicism, fails to capture the complicated reality of the field. At least one study reveals that the reality of sports reporting is much more complicated than either point of view suggests (Anderson, 2001). Future research should be of the same mindset; sports journalism is not monolithic.

The rise of televised sports precipitated the next major change in the coverage of sports. The conventional programming of televised sports has been observed to promote the similar interests of both the athletes and those who cover them, something Gruneau has called an “elective affinity” (Gruneau, 1989, p. 143). The big money that broadcast and cable networks pay major sports leagues for television rights is a clear conflict of interest (Strauss, 1998). The sheer size of those contracts essentially makes partnerships between the two sides a necessity. Many believe a distinction should be made between

those in print sports journalism and those in sports broadcasting because of the stark differences in objectivity between the two (Bloom, 1988; Boyle, 2006a). Boyle (2006a) argues that sports broadcasting has completely mutated into television entertainment.

Television has genuinely transformed the way print sports journalists cover sports. Once upon a time the newspaper focused on what happened in the game because few people saw it, but in the age of television sportswriters must find a way to give their readers something they didn't see or hear during the game, something new and unique. Hall of Fame sportswriter Frank Deford (2010) contends that sportswriters used to concern themselves with revealing human nature "but now there is a natural disposition to endlessly analyze, dissect and predict, to enlarge minutiae" (p. 62). The live carriage of post-game press conferences has served to further increase the difficulty of the sportswriter's job.

The Internet is the newest frontier for sports journalism. Content in the digital age is evolving in the direction of more complex story angles and an increased emphasis on analysis. Interactivity also characterizes sports journalism in the digital age. Wigley and Meirick (2008) contend that interactive media have changed the way sports journalists do their jobs while also increasing the influence that the sports fan audience has on sports journalists and the stories they cover. However sports bloggers are creating a whole new set of problems. They publish rumor and gossip regularly, contribute to the further crowding of the locker room and have created tension with sports teams over their right of access to sources (Arango, 2008). Despite these issues, many in sports journalism believe this type of coverage of sports is the future of sports journalism (Gray, 2000).



## **Social Identity**

The concept of social identity may help to provide an improved understanding of the complexity of the reporter-source relationship as well as some of the difficulties of the reporter's work. Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979) set forth social identity theory as a way to help comprehend the social-psychological foundation of intergroup dynamics. Social identity can be defined as "that part of the individual's self-concept that derives from knowledge of his or her membership in a social group, together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994, p. 78). The theory is composed of four interrelated concepts: (1) social categorization, or the labeling of self and others; (2) social identity; (3) social comparison, or the comparing of one's group, usually more favorably, to other groups; and (4) psychological group distinctiveness, which is to say that people want their group to be distinct from, as well as positively compared with, other groups (Taylor & Moghaddam). This need for a positive identity often results in discrimination; thus, social identity theory is most often applied to situations involving groups of unequal power. It can also lead to people resisting membership to specific groups because such a categorization may create doubt about their competence or qualification to be a member of the group pursuing some goal or activity (Day, 1998).

Social identity has the potential to be a powerful social-psychological force. According to Richard Jenkins (2008), "who we are and who we are seen to be can matter enormously. Nor is identification just a matter of the encounters and thresholds of individual lives. Although identification always involves individuals, something else – collectivity and history – may also be at stake" (p. 3). Jenkins proposes three distinct

orders of the human world, and identity is apparent in all three. The first is the individual order composed of people and what goes on in their heads. The second is the interaction order or what goes on between people. Interaction is where individual and collective identities are realized. The third, the institutional order, involves human organization or the established way of doing things (Jenkins). Ultimately social identity states that a person gains an understanding of selfhood through an ongoing and practical synthesizing of self-definition from within one's self and what is provided by other individuals/groups.

Social identity and the reporter-source relationship are both based on individual interactions. As Strentz (1978) noted more than three decades ago, "who the reporter is and how he or she is perceived by the news source may often determine what information ultimately reaches the audience – particularly if the reporter is unaware of his or her influence on the news source" (p. 16). Identity is an interaction between relationships of similarity and difference (Jenkins, 2008). This is where the role of social identity influences the reporter-source relationship. Discussions of social identity generally begin with gender and race; however, age, class background, and geographical location have also been recognized as identities that must be considered (Manning, 2001; Thiel, 2004). Others go further, stating that any specific situation that labels a person in a particular way must be considered in order to best understand the concept of identity (Abu-Lughod, 1993). At the very least, social identity is best viewed as multidimensional (Garza & Herringer, 1986). Social identity theory's explanatory potential has been usefully applied to journalism and sports. Hardin, Genovese and Yu (2009) point out that social identity persists in playing a significant yet invisible role in opportunity awarded or withheld in

the sports media industries. The discussion that follows illustrates issues of social identity in journalism and sports.

### **Gender.**

Gender is perhaps the most complex social identity (De Bruin, 2004); however, scholarly work in the journalism realm has most effectively applied the concept of social identity to gender issues. In the United States, sports journalism has been persistently antagonistic regarding gender equity (Chambers, Steiner & Fleming, 2004). Women have seen modest gains in terms of employment in the field of sports journalism across a variety of fields: women compose about 12% of the sports staffs at US newspapers and make up 8% of anchors and 19% of reporters on local television sportscasts (Hardin & Whiteside, 2006; Sheffer & Schultz, 2007; Lapchick et al., 2008; Papper, 2008). Women are even more severely under-represented in management positions. In newspaper sports departments, researchers found that 94% of sports editors, 90% of assistant sports editors, and 84% of copy editors and designers were men (Lapchick et al.). Female managers in sports television are even more rare; there were no female sports directors in a top-25 market until 2005 (“News and features,” 2005). In sports broadcasting, sideline reporting has become the role of choice for television networks to integrate women into broadcast teams. The sideline reporter position is viewed as the most menial position in the sports broadcasting team (Coventry, 2004). Female play-by-play announcers are more rare than sports television directors (Coventry). These numbers reveal the lack of opportunities for women’s voices and perspectives in the sports media.

The considerable research examining gender issues in sports is largely the work of feminist scholars. Much of it focuses on the quantitative disparity in coverage of male versus female athletes/teams (Duncan, Messner & Williams, 1991; Eastman & Billings, 2000; Vincent, Imwold, Masemann & Johnson, 2002; Messner, Duncan & Cooky, 2003) and the qualitative differences in the presentation or representation of male and female athletes across a variety of media (Duncan & Messner, 2000; Sagas, Cunningham, Wigley & Ashley, 2000; Bishop, 2003; Messner et al.). Work focusing on the professional lives of those in the sports media has been sparse (Cramer, 1994; Creedon, 1998; Lowes, 2000).

Gender has been examined in relationship to news sources. These studies center on the qualitative differences in journalism content that an increase of women in the field might produce. In their investigation of gender as a variable in source selection and use, Zoch and Turk (1998) found that female journalists attach greater credibility to female sources than male reporters and that female reporters are more likely to quote middle management sources of either sex. Meanwhile male reporters focus on managers at the top of the power hierarchy. This study also found that in addition to being sources less frequently, women were also quoted less frequently in a newspaper's most prominent stories. This did not vary by the gender of the reporter. Zoch and Turk concluded that female journalists are slightly more attuned to the lack of representation in the media for women in their selection of news sources. Armstrong (2004) also found the gender of the reporter linked to gender representation within news stories. Male sources and subjects dominated the coverage and were more prominently placed in the stories analyzed.

However, there is debate over the degree to which women perform or practice journalism differently from men (Chambers et al., 2004). The research in this area is best described as mixed. A recent study has shown that female sportswriters can make some difference in terms of the framing of their coverage but the authors emphasized that institutional structures lessen their effect (Kian & Hardin, 2009). There are some, however, who believe strongly that women see things differently than men. Melissa Ludtke, a former reporter for *Sports Illustrated*, points to a conversation she had with Hall of Fame catcher Johnny Bench as proof (Cramer, 1992). Bench said that the male sports reporters he interacted with were more concerned with the kind of pitch that was thrown to strike out a batter. Women, on the other hand, would rather know about the conversation that takes place between the catcher and umpire throughout the course of an entire game. According to Ludtke, what Bench was saying is that women bring a humanistic perspective to the coverage of sports. Female sports journalists have also noted the proclivity of men to suddenly insert statistics into their stories, another example of gender difference in coverage (Staurowsky & DiManno, 2002). However, Liesbet van Zoonen (1994) suggests caution in assuming women are changing the types of content produced. According to van Zoonen, changes within the practice of journalism have led to an increase in opportunities for female journalists, which she argues is much different than the notion that women in journalism are changing the types of content produced.

Other research has found little change in journalism practice based on gender. Studies have shown no reporting differences due to gender (Liebler & Smith, 1997). Others suggest gender makes little difference in the amount of newspaper space afforded women's sports (Pederson, Whisenant & Schneider, 2003). Considering that female

sports journalists have expressed a responsibility to cover women's sports, the persistent lack of women's sports coverage raises important questions about how women are socialized into sports departments (Hardin & Shain, 2005). As an explanation, scholars often attribute such situations to how deeply rooted hegemonic masculinity is in sports and the sports media. Hegemonic masculinity is the term used to describe the general acceptance of male behavior as the normative ideal. It is the foremost characteristic of Western society and positions men as superior to women (Connell, 2005). Despite constant challenges, hegemonic masculinity remains extremely difficult to change without the assent of the most socio-economically powerful men (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

A lack of significant gender differences in the coverage of news may be proof that journalists identify more strongly with their professional identities than any individual, social identities (van Zoonen, 1994; Ross, 2004). Research has shown that women journalists are faced with accepting their "feminine news identity," which essentially involves a stronger identification with the audience, or adopting the more masculine traits of just presenting the facts and other institutional norms (van Zoonen, 1998, p. 31). Thiel (2004) points out that the result is a fragmented identity on numerous levels. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1990) contends that one's identity is invariably shifting, thus, fragmentation is the natural state of identity. Identity then is invariably up for negotiation. As Hall explains, some characteristic of an identity will always be left out, which allows for the construction of an "other" identity (p. 4). The "other" is one's concept of what he or she is not. For Hall, one may assume the "other" identity as a way to function within society, an institution or organization, or he or she may reject it.

Hardin and Shain (2006) identified a fragmented identity in a study of female sports journalists. They found their participants were faced with negotiating the tension between their identities as female and their professional identities as journalists. This frequently presented a host of difficulties because of inherent conflict between their participants' female sensibilities and the traditional masculine values of journalism and sports (Hardin & Shain). Hardin and Whiteside (2009) suggest that resolving gender identity with professional identity could potentially be exhausting for female sports journalists.

In addition to issues of representation and presentation, women continue to face a host of obstacles in their work in sports journalism. Women in the field have much shorter careers and fewer advancement opportunities than their male counterparts (Etling, 2002; Hardin, Shain & Schultz-Poniatowski, 2008; Hardin & Whiteside, 2009). This is at least partly due to family obligations (Claringhould, Knoppers & Elling, 2004; Hardin et al., 2008). Some barriers, such as the unwritten requirements to be young and physically attractive, are more specific to television sports journalists (Sheffer & Schultz, 2007; Weibel, Wismath & Groner, 2008). This creates what Sheffer and Schultz refer to as a "double standard" – not only do male sports directors often assume that women are generally less qualified than men to cover sports but until women in sports television are hired for their skill rather than physical attractiveness they will continue to have shorter careers in the field. Female television sports journalists also appear to be objectified more than other female journalists; this often leaves younger aspirants believing they need to be beautiful to pursue a career in the field (Staurowsky & DiManno, 2004).

Women sports journalists continue to face discrimination from male managers, colleagues and the teams, players and coaches they cover. This includes sexist and unrealistic assumptions, sexual harassment, and being made to feel like an outsider (Miller & Miller, 1995; Eberhard & Myers, 1998; Staurowsky & DiManno, 2002; Sheffer & Schultz, 2007). Although a majority of female sports journalists have dealt with discrimination, many believe gains toward equity have been made (Miloch, Pedersen, Smucker & Whisenant, 2005). Other exclusionary practices include less desirable story assignments, little recognition and earning less than men (Chambers et al., 2004; Hardin & Shain, 2005).

Gender research in journalism has examined mechanisms that female journalists employ to contend with some of the negative experiences described above. Lachover's (2005) research into female journalists and their male sources reveals female reporters cope with a patriarchal environment by employing tactics that exploit stereotypical male attitudes toward women. These include viewing female reporters as sex objects and/or as weak in character. One such tactic is flirting, which is used to purposely create sexual tension with the male source as a means to strengthen the relationship. The second plays upon the misguided notion of the female as weak and lacking in savvy or experience. This serves to empower the male source and encourages him to give the female journalist the guidance and/or information she seeks. Robinson (2005) prefers to say that most female media professionals who work in male-dominated organizations or institutions "use their gender strategically" (p. 187). For example, they may use their perceived lack of expertise as a way to spend more time with information sources or use flirting to secure invitations to important social events (Hardin et al., 2008). Regardless, these



tactics help the female journalists to attain their professional goals although most female journalists must also constantly deal internally with the propriety of using their sexuality to achieve these aims. As Steiner (1998) points out, women resent men's lack of self-consciousness about gender because men do not have to choose between professional sensibility and gender sensibility. Such gender issues serve to create an uncomfortable workplace for female journalists.

Sports media organizations have been specifically identified for their white, masculine culture (Pedersen, Whisenant & Schneider, 2003; Knoppers & Elling, 2004; Hardin & Whiteside, 2006; The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sports, 2006; Sheffer & Schultz, 2007). Susan Fornoff (1993) has described the difficulty of breaking into the patriarchal domain of the press box where she was often ostracized or alienated by male sportswriters. In decades prior, male sportswriters treated female reporters even harsher (Creedon, 1994). However, male sportswriters were generally more open-minded about Fornoff's presence in the locker room than the male athletes she covered. Little has changed nearly two decades later. Recent scholarship shows that female sports reporters still regularly deal with verbal abuse or the threat of physical abuse and sexual discrimination in the course of their job duties (Druzin, 2001; Hardin & Shain, 2005).

While the contemporary style of sports coverage requires quotes from athletes and coaches, reporters spend very little of their time in the locker room (Lowe, 2000). The hyper-masculine safe haven that is the male locker room can become a hostile work environment for women upon their entrance into it. Cramer (1994) found that female sports journalists generally agreed that women in the profession face fewer locker room problems covering National Hockey League (NHL) and National Basketball Association

(NBA) teams. This could be because these teams have fewer players than football and baseball teams. Some black female reporters believe black athletes have an appreciation for just how difficult it is for female reporters to enter the locker room (Fornoff, 1993). Ronnie Lott, a Hall of Fame football player, told the Association for Women in Sports Media (AWSM) that black athletes empathize with female reporters because they “know what it’s like to walk into a room and be instantly hated” (p. 109). Because of this bond, black athletes have often rescued female reporters from uncomfortable and even hostile situations.

Most female sports reporters have shocking stories of the sexual harassment they have experienced in the locker room (Nelson, 1994; Druzin, 2001). Perhaps in an effort to justify such harassment, athletes have often accused female reporters of having ulterior motives for going into the locker room: that is to look at naked men. While reporters are in locker rooms for short periods of time and with the sole intention of gathering information necessary to do their jobs, athletes and team and league officials have wanted to believe differently (Nelson, 1994). Athletes sometimes attempt to get female reporters to look at their genitals through childish games (Daulerio, 2008) and often label a female reporter as a “looker” (Nelson, p. 244). Nelson points out that the word rhymes with hooker and has some of the same connotations. It is used by athletes to identify someone who they believe stares at their genitals. The truth is that the athletes could choose to cover up. Teams and sports leagues have attempted to eliminate some of this tension with post-game press conferences outside of the locker room, but any reporter who takes pride in his/her work would rarely be able to turn in a quality story without additional quotes and details from other athletes who are best accessed inside the locker room. Such

difficulties have forced women to approach their jobs differently, such as calling ahead to give advance warning that a woman will be entering the locker room or going to great lengths to not give athletes or coaches the wrong impression (Cramer, 1994). While women no longer have to deal with giving advance warning, they still often find themselves in very uncomfortable positions in the locker room because of athletes asking them out or making inappropriate sexual suggestions (Druzin, 2001).

Despite the aforementioned trials and tribulations of women in sports journalism they tend to downplay their negative situations and generally see their gender as an advantage (Hardin & Shain, 2006; Hardin et al., 2008; Hardin & Whiteside, 2009). This has been explained through the ethos of neoliberalism and its mantra of personal freedom. Neoliberalism transfers responsibility for structural issues from the institution or organization onto the individual (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). The issue of women seeing their gender as an advantage in the sports media workplace also highlights the role *privilege* plays in the sports media environment. *Privilege* represents supremacy by virtue of social identity (Thomas & Chrobot-Mason, 2005). In other words, privileged employees are the standard and their social identity is transparent; privilege is maintained because it is generally unrecognized and unacknowledged (McIntosh, 1998; Wildman, 1996). This helps to explain why women in the sports media must constantly work to be accepted in a variety of ways from a variety of people. For example, women may feel compelled to take part in male rituals such as sports talk despite such rituals having no bearing upon their ability to do their jobs (Helgesen, 2003). Such striving for acceptance has strong potential to lead to their adoption of the dominant, male values (van Zoonen, 1998; Claringhould et al., 2004). In short, women in the sports media are negatively

impacted by the hegemonic masculine system. As Schell and Rodriguez (2000) assert, “controlling women’s status in sport may be the most negative and powerful aspect to male hegemonic dominion” (p. 19).

### **Race.**

Minorities also face a lack of representation and stereotypical coverage in the media (Gomes & Williams, 1990; Entman, 1992, 1994; Campbell, 1995; Entman & Rojecki, 2000). In sports journalism, a 2008 newsroom diversity study resulted in researchers giving APSE members a ‘C’ for racial hiring practices. Whites dominate sports departments: 94% of sports editors, 89% of assistant sports editors, 88% of columnists, 87% of reporters, and 89% of copy editors and designers were white (Lapchick et al.). African-Americans, Latinos, and Asians all saw modest gains from 2006 to 2008 on the staffs of APSE member newspapers and websites. Minorities are better represented in television news, with the exception of Asian Americans; however, the minority television workforce is still more than 10% lower than the minority population in the United States (Papper, 2008). In local sports television, 86% of sports anchors and 83.8% of sports reporters are white (Papper). Some minorities such as Asian Americans and Native Americans are barely visible at all on local television sportscasts (Papper).

In terms of news coverage and content, minorities face many of the same under-representation issues as women. Minorities are rarely quoted as sources and coverage of stories they consider important is scant (Gist, 1993; Poindexter, Smith & Heider, 2003). Research focusing on those who decide what stories get reported, or the so-called

gatekeepers of news, found that despite good intentions gatekeepers continue to replicate coverage that could be described as racist (Gilens, 2000; Heider, 2000). Story assignments are also often segregated by the race of a reporter or anchor (Poindexter et al., 2003; Pritchard & Stonbely, 2007). For instance, managers assign blacks to cover minority issues while whites cover politics and business beats. This type of newsroom “racial profiling” may factor into the lack of advancement for minorities into management positions (Pritchard & Stonbely, p. 231). In sports journalism, the conscious attempts of sports media managers to use the racial identity of reporters to their advantage is referred to as “stacking” and involves assigning blacks to cover what managers deem to be race-appropriate sports (Rowe, 1999). This delimiting of assignments may result in fewer opportunities for blacks to cover the most desirable sports stories thereby curbing their opportunities for advancement. Lindsey (2001) encountered another issue pertaining to her racial identity in sports journalism; she found that black athletes expected her as a black journalist to be sympathetic to them.

In sports, the low number of African American sports editors translates into inadequate coverage of issues that affect the lives and perceptions of black athletes (Wolper, 2005). The sports media’s negative constructions of race have been well documented. Stereotypical coverage of black athletes emphasizes their physical abilities over their intellectual capacity (Rada, 1996; Curry, 1997; McCarthy & Jones, 1997; Billings, 2004). The social deviance of the black athlete is another troubling stereotype (Lapchick, 1999). Wolper asserts that the issue is no longer just one of diversity but rather “the integrity of the newspaper industry itself” (p. 28). On a more positive note, Hispanic sports editors are now approaching the number of African American sports

editors, possibly because of the increasing number of Hispanics in professional baseball (Wolper). In television sports, minorities are generally concentrated in lower positions within the industry. For example, minorities are generally the stereotypical ex-jocks in sportscasting (Coventry).

Minorities inevitably face a variety of difficulties in their jobs because of their minority status. The psychological effect of minority status can have a significant effect on racial identity (Melendez, 2008). Research has revealed pressure for black journalists to assimilate into the established newsroom standards about how to cover blacks despite these standards not being formally taught (Mazingo, 1989). Broadcasting research shows that black anchors speak from the same perspective as white anchors (Entman, 1990). In short, research shows that socialization within a given media organization has the potential to be very strong for minorities and force them to adapt to the white structure already in place (Rodgers & Thorson, 2003). Scholars also suggest that even in racially diverse newsrooms the hegemony of whiteness can still dominate (Pritchard & Stonbely, 2007). In essence, minorities must constantly prove that their identity does not have any bearing on the way they do their job. In other words, they must show that they still do their job as a white employee would.

### **Age.**

Communications research has identified age as a meaningful group in terms of social identity (Williams & Harwood, 2004). Identification with one's age, as a young or old sports journalist for example, can carry with it a particular value or emotional significance. For instance, a journalist's credibility or confidence can be connected to his

or her self-concept based on age. While age and experience (in the journalism field) are often related, experience is not a social identity. One's level of experience would put him or her into a demographic category but it does not place them into a *social* group. Furthermore, experience is not a readily identifiable characteristic such as one's gender, race, and to a lesser degree, age.

Researchers who have examined age in the journalism field have suggested it plays a role in journalists' news decisions (Peiser, 2000). Studies specific to sports journalists often explore the effect of age on sports journalism careers. Younger (and less experienced) sports journalists appear to have higher rates of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization than their older (more experienced) colleagues (Reinhardy, 2006). A study by Miloch et al. (2005) revealed that older female sports journalists (over the age of 27) believed there were fewer opportunities for entry into the field. Meanwhile, Hardin and Whiteside (2009) found younger female sports journalists struggled more with the pitfalls of their work such as the need to overachieve and dealing with harassment and discrimination.

Another study specific to sports journalism centered on ethics and professionalism in the field. Hardin, Zhong and Whiteside (2009), found that older, male sports reporters had less stringent ethical and professional journalism standards. They were more likely to accept free tickets for family, friends and supervisors and more likely to become friends with sources, namely athletes, coaches and management. Moreover, those who reported friendships with sources were also more likely to accept free tickets and favor local teams in their coverage. These same older male reporters also disagreed with the idea that such activity hurt the objectivity of sports coverage.

Age has also been examined in sports television. Sheffer and Schultz (2007) found, in their study of local television sports, that older male news directors were not aware of the double standard they held women to, specifically that women are hired more for their looks than skill which likely leads to their relatively short careers in the industry. Meanwhile, female news directors and younger male news directors were conscious of the different standards for women and acknowledged them. Stone's (n.d.) research into the broadcasting industry from the 1990s supports this. Stone found that women remained in the field for only about half the median number of years as men, who stayed for an average of 10 years. Stone also found that women in broadcasting reported being younger (and less experienced) than their male counterparts. The unequal tenure of male and female reporters would place women at a disadvantage in a variety of ways. While this is perhaps more appropriately viewed as a gender issue, age is also a factor. Age has also been identified as related to the perceived credibility of a newscaster – older male newscasters were perceived as being the most credible (Weibel et al., 2008).

The scholarship above shows the propensity for age to be viewed in combination with other identities or demographics. The challenge for social identity research into age is to better understand how age combines and interacts with other identities including which identities become most salient and powerful in particular situations.

### **Professional Identity.**

The notion of journalism as a profession is a crucial one to journalists' identity because it involves their claim to authority as the legitimate and credible purveyors of news and information (Lowrey & Anderson, 2005; Lowrey, 2006). For this reason,



journalists are particularly dependent on how the public perceives their legitimacy (Lowrey & Anderson). Contemporary journalism appears to be viewed as a “semi-profession,” meaning the work of a journalist is respected but not seen as overly difficult or above the abilities of the ordinary person (Lowrey & Anderson). Moreover, research has shown that audiences are not opposed to rather broad definitions of journalism (Lowrey & Anderson). These perceptions of journalism allow “rivals” such as bloggers the opportunity to impinge upon journalists’ occupational jurisdiction, which could ultimately lead to a weakening of their authority (Lowrey & Anderson; Lowrey). In such an environment, journalists are more likely to rethink and revamp the way they go about their work in order to protect their authority and thus their professional identity (Lowrey).

Journalism is viewed as a profession by those who practice it because of the types of stories covered and their importance to the proper functioning of a democracy (Oates & Pauly, 2007). Sports journalism rarely meets these standards of political or social importance (Oates & Pauly). Furthermore, accuracy and objectivity are the foremost journalism values and journalists practice strict adherence to a professional code of ethics (Society of Professional Journalists, 1996; McQuail, 2000). Critics often view sports journalism as in violation of these tenets and the ethical norms those in the journalism profession strive to abide by. These include accepting perks from sources such as free tickets and writing from a biased perspective, also referred to as “boosterism” (Hardin, 2005, p. 66). As sportswriter George Vecsey (1989) admits, “Sports reporters are not supposed to root, but we cannot help having our passions and our opinions” (p. 17). For these reasons the sports department has long been referred to as the “toy department.” The earnestness of sports journalists’ desire to achieve professional standards has also

been called into question. Studies have revealed that sports departments say they want to move toward professional status in journalism in order to reap the rewards that come with it but do not show commitment to that in their work (Garrison & Salwen, 1989; Hardin). Wanta (2006) elaborates on this identity crisis specific to those working in sports journalism, “Newspaper editors often consider sports a necessary evil: Sports sections are among the most read, but sports are not viewed with the same respect as other newspaper staples, such as crime news, politics, and business. Add to this the impression by many editors that sportswriters do not take themselves seriously and sometimes engage in ethically questionable practices” (p. 105).

The subject of identity in a professional context has been explored as it pertains to work in the contemporary cultural industries and media workplace (Hesmondhalgh, 2002; Deuze, 2007). Thiel (2004) studied female journalists who switched from traditional journalism to online journalism and found her participants negotiating their identities as they grappled with their roles as journalists and as technophiles and adapting to the new features of their jobs including the new organizational and occupational structures they found themselves in. The previously discussed study by Hardin and Shain (2006) showed female sports journalists balancing the conflicting identities of woman and professional journalist; however, the women in Hardin and Shain’s study did ultimately see the two as compatible.

Some point to the quick changes in markets and technologies as the culprit behind the professional identities of those who work in the media being “significantly disrupted, challenged and changed” (Deuze, 2007, p. 110). One of the most glaring developments in the contemporary media environment is the audience’s newfound ability to produce its

own media content, most notably for journalists, in the form of blogs or websites. As Deuze (2007) explains, “Once the audience disappears or has gone off to make its own media the professional identity of the media worker gets significantly undermined” (p. 156).

Reporters in the digital age may also be prone to identity issues in part because of the increasing promotional imperative placed on them by their organizations. As Wernick (1991) has described, self-promotion may create a sort of identity crisis:

The contemporary subject, and nowhere more than in the competitively mediated zones of work and play where our personal self-presentations directly affect our inter-individual rates of exchange, is faced with a profound problem of authenticity. If social survival, let alone competitive success, depends on continual, audience-oriented, self-staging, what are we behind the mask? If the answer points to a second identity (a puppeteer?) how are we to negotiate the split sense of self this implies? (Wernick, 1991, p. 193)

Once again, the notion of a fragmented identity and questions concerning how to negotiate it are raised.

The journalism profession can exert a significant pull on identity but a journalist’s identity may also be influenced by the media organization he or she works for. Research suggests that organizational culture (via the media outlet) and professional culture (via the journalism profession) often conflict (Ettema, Whitney & Wackman, 1987; Bloor & Dawson, 1994). Specifically, the professional’s internalized judgment in the service of the public interest is often usurped by the particular interests of the organization (Ettema et al.). Research into the television news and newspaper industries has revealed that organizational culture is becoming increasingly important (Hollifield, Kosicki & Becker, 2001). Managers appear to be more and more concerned with hiring good employees over good journalists. An employee who fits this description has traditionally been

referred to as a “company man.” Interestingly, research reveals that television news directors were more likely than their newspaper counterparts to choose professional qualities over organizational concerns in hiring decisions (Hollifield et al.). Others have noted that news organizations are increasingly pressuring journalists to “accommodate organizational, occupational, economic and audience needs” (Chambers et al., 2004, p. 122). It is pressures such as these that generate tension between identities and ultimately lead to a fragmented professional identity.

Journalists may be feeling more impotent in their work capacities than ever before. The journalist is increasingly subjected to the authority of professional or organizational cultures with the exception of that rare individual who holds sufficient power within his or her organization to override these cultures (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). As media organizations increasingly wield more power over their journalists, the issue of their socialization into a specific organizational culture becomes increasingly important (Breed, 1955). Shoemaker and Reese state, “clearly at the organizational level we must question the extent to which organizational values predominate in the face of individual values, and how individuals adapt to the controls imposed on them by others” (p. 172).

It has also been argued that corporations attempt to regulate professional identity and use it as a form of organizational control (Storey, Salaman & Platman, 2005). This is accomplished through transferring the onus of enterprise with its overtones of efficiency, productivity, empowerment, and autonomy onto the individual and away from the organization or corporation (du Gay, 1996). This approach can also be viewed as a form of neoliberalism. According to Storey et al. the corporate goal is to “reconstitute workers

as more adaptable, flexible, and willing to move between activities and assignments and to take responsibility for their own actions and their successes and failures” (p. 1035-36). While the company desires this workforce flexibility (Sennett, 1998; Storey et al., 2005), it engenders considerable anxiety over job security among employees (Deuze, 2007). Tim McGuire, a former editor and senior vice president of the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, insists that reporters are getting overwhelmed. “Reporters are doing too much, and they’re confused about their mission” (Poole, 2008, p. 20). In the precariousness of media work in the digital age, insecurity also becomes more pronounced as the quality of one’s work appears to have little or no connection to one’s future employment prospects (Deuze). As Deuze states, “a life in media is a life constantly on the edge of chaos, confronted on all sides by ambiguities and contingency” (p. 43).

## **Chapter Three**

### **The Research Process**

#### **Introduction**

The aim of this study was to examine the changes and challenges sports television reporters face in the contemporary sports-media complex. Through ethnographically oriented methods I attempted to illuminate the institutional, organizational and interpersonal dynamics that affect the sports television reporter's work and the various factors that inform and complicate his or her reporter-source interactions. I believed an improved understanding of the television sports reporter's contemporary situation would allow us to proceed from a more informed perspective in terms of the newsgathering process and television sports journalism in general. In seeking to better understand this relationship, the study addressed three research questions: (a) What specific factors complicate the reporter-source relationship in sports? (b) What role does identity play in the reporter-source relationship? (c) How are sports television reporters adapting to the factors complicating the reporter-source relationship and the resulting changes taking place in the sports-media complex?

This chapter describes the study's research methodology and methods and includes discussions of the following: (a) description of the research sample, (b) overview of research design and rationale for research approach, (c) methods of data collection, (d) data analysis process, (e) ethical considerations, (f) issues of trustworthiness, and (g) limitations of the method used. The chapter concludes with a brief summary.

## **The Research Sample**

I performed my research at a regional sports cable channel in a major East Coast city. This choice was based primarily upon my ability to gain sufficient access to the station's newsroom and staff as well as some of the professional sports teams the station covered on a regular basis. I was confident of my ability to gain access because I had been employed as an associate producer at this station until 2003. Since that time I had occasionally worked in a freelance capacity; however, I did not accept any freelance opportunities during the course of my data collection in an effort to avoid potential conflicts of interest as well as to convey to the participants my new role as researcher as opposed to television colleague. My relationship with both management and newsroom personnel allowed me entrée into the sports television production process that very few researchers have acquired.

Gaining access was a relatively simple process. I had maintained contacts there including one former colleague who was the assistant news director at the station. I had discussed my research idea with him about a year prior to commencing the project and explained the kind of access I was hoping to acquire at the station. The assistant news director agreed to provide it and was genuinely interested in the knowledge I was hoping to generate. This contact person also agreed to help facilitate access to professional sports teams through the station. I was given media credentials with the station that enabled me to "shadow" reporters on assignments. The IRB required that I provide confidentiality to all participants. Participants were given pseudonyms and any information that might readily identify the research site, including such details as the city's sports franchises, management and players, was kept anonymous. Following the contact person's

discussion with other station personnel, a permission form was signed documenting my access privileges at the regional sports channel. We also determined that specific details regarding the dates and times of my visits would be set up through the assistant news director and/or the newsroom assignment desk.

### **The Research Site**

Launched on October 1, 1997, this regional sports network could be viewed as an ESPN for this particular sports market. This regional sports channel is the charter member of a regional sports network, which now operates 10 such regional sports channels nationwide. Other regional sports networks exist in both the U.S. and Canada, and their success has led to the creation of networks by professional sports franchises as well as collegiate athletic conferences. The lifeblood of such networks is the live broadcasting of professional and college sporting events, the rights to which are often secured because the team owns the channel or the media entity owns or partially owns the team being broadcast. In other cases, partnerships are created between team and channel through broadcast rights fees.

The station in this study is no different. The station's corporate parent company owns the city's professional basketball and hockey teams and the station broadcasts their games. The teams' arena acts as the home for the station's newsroom and television studio. The city's professional baseball team is a broadcast partner with the channel. This seemingly unique ownership situation has become increasingly common in the world of sports television (Kramer, 2002). This regional sports channel's relationship with the city's professional baseball, basketball and hockey teams includes its designation as the



source for the live broadcasting of the majority of each team's games. Because these regional sports networks thrive on advertising dollars generated from the live broadcast of sporting events, they often augment and supplement their coverage of these events and teams with a variety of shows that revolve around them. These include pre-game and post-game analysis shows, news/highlight shows, discussion shows often in the form of roundtables with newspaper journalists who cover the teams on a daily basis, and other specials designed to go in-depth on a team or game. The shows differ in terms of tenor and content. Some are higher in opinionated content and analysis while others are more focused on providing news and information.

An analogy can be drawn between 24-hour news channels and regional all-sports channels in several important ways. The first is the immediate issue of the need for content to fill the 24-hour programming schedule as efficiently and profitably as possible. The programs mentioned above are the standard fare produced in order to achieve this. The network produces the majority of these shows in-house and some are shared across the network's stations. Second, similar to the effect 24-hour news has had on the amount and degree of public affairs, political coverage and various other areas of coverage, the devotion of an entire channel to a local market's professional and/or college's sports teams has translated into an unprecedented level of coverage for these franchises and collegiate teams, players, coaches and management. In short, the expansion of sports coverage on regional sports networks mirrors the effect that 24-hour news channels have had on the news landscape: unprecedented viewer access, the delivery of timely news in greater detail and live, unedited coverage of the most important events. This is the environment in which this study was conducted.

The criteria for selecting participants were that their work at the station included newsgathering and interaction with information sources such as athletes or coaches. In its newsroom, the station employed 11 reporters: seven men and four women. They also have a web-based reporting staff. Three of the men are African-American. No other racial minority was represented. All of the women are white. Field producers, who work as newsgatherers on a daily basis, were also included. This role characterizes much of the work I performed for the station during my employment and freelance work there. A list of all interviewees is included in *Appendix A*.

I received permission to shadow the station's reporters to various venues including the city's professional football, baseball and basketball facilities. The majority of these opportunities were with the city's professional football team, a member of the National Football League (NFL). Professional sports franchises in leagues such as the NFL have grown in popularity exponentially, even in just the past decade. Despite the recession, the average value of an NFL franchise in 2009 remained at more than one billion dollars (Brown, 2009).

I attended training camp, the kickoff to the NFL's season, with members of the station's newsroom. NFL training camps have evolved from practices held in relative obscurity into major productions that require much more than the necessary accommodations for players and coaches. The pro football team in the market in this study held its training camp on a college campus about an hour from the team's home city. The production of such an event included the need for numerous large, portable bleachers for fans, large tents for VIPs, a football-themed play area for children, hydraulic lifts for coaches and video crews, a large vending area for both food and

merchandise, areas for fan interaction with players, a number of security and other event personnel, as well as a sizeable work area for the extensive number of media covering the camp. The director of the city's pro football team's media services department reported 68 day-one media at the team's 2009 training camp. While there were approximately 30 regular media on site on a day-to-day basis, the team handed out nearly 200 media passes during the course of the four-week training camp. Professional sports franchises in leagues such as the NFL have also become increasingly wary of granting access to their operations. While my access to all of the city's professional sports teams was admittedly limited, I was grateful for the opportunities I was given and believe it was ample for my participant observation data collection.

### **Methodology & Methods**

I determined that a qualitative approach provided the methods best suited for studying how the complexities of the sports television reporter's world are experienced, interpreted and understood in a specific context and point in time. The intent was to investigate the work of the sports television reporter by enabling my entrance (or in this case a re-entrance) into this world and ultimately to achieve a holistic understanding of it (Patton, 1990). From my point of view, those attributes that characterize a qualitative approach dovetail appropriately with the aims of this study. These attributes include (1) an emphasis on comprehending how and why events and actions occur, (2) an emphasis on facilitating contextual understanding, (3) cultivating interaction between researcher and participants, (4) embracing an interpretive position, and (5) maintaining flexibility in the research design (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008).

Within the framework of a qualitative approach, I chose the ethnographic research strategies of participant observation and interviewing for their ability to best accommodate my research goals. My approach to the participants in this study can be articulated this way: “I want to know what you know in the way you know it... will you become my teacher and help me understand?” (Wolcott, 1982, p. 369). This research design employed naturalistic approaches to inductively and holistically understand human behavior and experience in settings specific to the sports television reporter (Patton, 1990). Strategies common to all forms of naturalistic inquiry are observing, questioning and listening with the goal of immersion in the world of those being studied (Holloway, 1997).

### **Data Collection Methods**

Observation is perhaps the most fundamental of ethnographic techniques. Participant observation spanned from July to December. I was permitted to “shadow” reporters and their photojournalists during a variety of football, baseball and basketball practices and games that included (1) football training camp, practice and a regular season game, (2) a regular season baseball game, (3) basketball training camp. Additional observation involved talking to and observing reporters and field producers in their day-to-day newsroom activity. In one instance my participation included taking on the role of field producer and actually interviewing professional athletes, allowing me to enter into a legitimate reporter-source interaction and experience the dynamic from the reporter’s perspective.

I considered myself a “complete member researcher,” a reference to my unique situation in the organization in this study. I was already viewed as a member there because of my prior professional experience there (Adler & Adler, 1987). My fieldnotes included written accounts and descriptions of the station’s personnel and their relationships, the setting and scene, dialogue, as well as my own personal experiences and reactions. The process I adopted entailed a progression from mental notes to jotted notes to fuller fieldnotes, as advocated by Lofland & Lofland (1995). Mental notes acted as a form of preparation so I could later write down what I was seeing. Jotted notes were the key words and phrases taken down while in the field or not far removed from it. The methods and styles used to record jottings are unique to each field researcher. Fuller fieldnotes, the final step, involved the process of combining what was in my head with my notes in order to organize and depict my fieldwork accounts. Moreover, my observational notes were not only data to be analyzed, they also served to alert me to topics that required further examination and discussion during interviewing.

### **Interviewing.**

According to Schutz (1967), understanding human behavior hinges on the ability to gain access to someone’s “subjective understanding,” which is to say the meaning that person makes out of his or her actions (chap. 3). Interviewing can provide this access. Through interviewing one can learn the context of people’s behavior, allowing the researcher the opportunity to better comprehend the meaning of that behavior. Interviewing then is a basic form of inquiry for understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they attach to that experience (Seidman, 2006).

Interviewing as a method of entering into another person's internal reality begins with the assumption that the viewpoint of others is "meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit" (Patton, 1990, p. 278). Rubin and Rubin (1995), in speaking about qualitative interviewing, go so far as to say that "through what you hear and learn, you can extend your intellectual and emotional reach across time, class, race, sex and geographical division" (p. 1).

I employed two types of interviewing techniques in the data collection process. The first and more informal is casual or friendly conversation. Researchers commonly use participant observation and friendly conversations to gather most of their data. These interactions are often carried on without the participant's critical awareness; researchers simply carry on a casual conversation while introducing a few ethnographic questions (Spradley, 1979). Friendly conversation was valuable in the newsroom because of how precious time is in the deadline driven television industry. The critical literature review along with my observations and prior experiences informed these conversations. While eliciting valuable information, they also functioned to reveal salient themes for further examination and thus helped to better focus the more formal interviews.

McCracken's (1988) long interview was the design employed for the more formal interviews conducted with members of the newsroom who agreed to be interviewed. The long interview was chosen chiefly for its ability to achieve certain ethnographic objectives while relieving the researcher from "intimate, repeated, and prolonged involvement in the life and community of the respondent" (p. 7). In short, it was best suited for the fast-paced and time-constrained newsroom environment I was studying. McCracken calls this approach "a sharply focused, rapid, highly intensive" process

designed to give the researcher “a highly efficient, productive, ‘stream-lined’ instrument of inquiry” (p. 7).

The first three steps of McCracken’s (1988) four-step approach revolve around the preparation for and conducting of the interview. In the first step, the literature review helped to both define potential problems and construct the questionnaire.

The second step was a detailed examination of my personal experience with the topic being studied. The interviewer as human research instrument becomes prominent in the study during this step. An intimate familiarity with the culture under examination, such as my own experience with the organization and participants in this study, runs the distinct and dangerous risk of numbing the researcher’s ability to observe and analyze. However, it also has its advantages. According to McCracken (1988), “This acquaintance gives the investigator a fineness of touch and delicacy of insight that few ethnographers working in other cultures can hope to develop” (p. 32). This applied to both my professional experience in the field of sports television as well as with this sports operation.

Two processes were stressed in this step, familiarization and defamiliarization. The process of familiarization honed my all-important listening skills. “Listen more, talk less,” as Seidman (2006) advises (p. 78). You listen in order to hear the meaning of what is being said, which requires the researcher to figure out the taken-for-granted understandings within a specific research setting (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Defamiliarization manufactures distance from the researcher’s own deeply embedded assumptions. The goal is empathy but not so much that you miss the negatives, or if you do notice them, you do not report them. I was very determined to maintain the necessary

distance from colleagues because of my relationships with many of them and the research subject. This required me to faithfully be reflexive of my assumptions and relationships and act appropriately in all interactions in the research setting. A second objective of defamiliarization is to learn to strive for balance as opposed to neutrality. I was not attempting to be neutral in my work with former colleagues instead I focused on being balanced in my reporting of the data they provided me. Striving for balance and paying careful attention not to miss the negatives were important for me because of my unique relationship to the site and people studied; I used both familiarization and defamiliarization to combat the dangers of familiarity while still maintaining the advantages I possessed because of my prior sports television professional experience with this organization and many of the participants.

McCracken's third step is the construction of the questionnaire or question guide, which consisted of a few biographical questions followed by a series of questions in key subject areas. The question guide provided a blueprint for conducting the interview but was not employed so rigidly as to prevent the interview from heading in other directions based on my judgment. I was careful to avoid dominating the interview with predetermined questions. Interview questions were adapted during the process of research to reflect an increased awareness of what was being discussed (Creswell, 1998). In this way, the qualitative interview can be described as emergent. My prior interviewing experience as a field producer was useful in this regard. It allowed me to better identify instances when a participant's answer begged for a follow-up question rather than a strict adherence to asking the next question on the question guide.



It was a point of emphasis that participants be allowed to tell their story on their terms. It is important to focus on the subjective experience of the participant. This gives them the chance to reconstruct their experience based on their own sense of what is important (Seidman, 2006). I listened carefully for key terms such as “culture,” “paranoia” or “objectivity,” which often signal important lines of questioning. I also followed up on instances of impression management, topic avoidance, deliberate distortion, minor misunderstanding and outright incomprehension as well as implications and assumptions that would not have come out in conversation without prompting from me (McCracken, 1988). Furthermore, I was sensitive to cross-cultural interviewing difficulties because of the increased likelihood of misinterpretation and miscommunication (Patton, 1990). I felt this was especially important for my interviews with female participants who may approach their work from a perspective significantly different from my male perspective.

I conducted long interviews with 14 participants. The participants included nine males and five females. Two of the participants were African-American men. No other racial minority was represented. One female reporter was both a reporter and a booking producer, meaning she interacted with and acquired guests for shows and did reporting. A member of the web-based reporting staff, the lone woman, was also interviewed because she has done a modicum of television reporting work at the station. I was unable to interview two reporters at the station because of an inability to coordinate a long interview session with either. Additionally, a variety of informal interviews were conducted during the course of my time spent in the newsroom as well as during participant observation out in the field. The number of people I interviewed is admittedly

small but sufficiency and saturation of information are the preferred criteria necessary for determining sample size in qualitative research (Seidman, 2006). According to Wolcott (2008), modest increases in sample size do not help to achieve the types of generalizations quantitative researchers are interested in but they most certainly compromise the opportunity to report in depth.

### **Methods for Data Analysis**

The data collection and analysis process required sifting through a considerable amount of data in order to better comprehend the perceptions of sports television reporters, their relationship with their information sources in the sports-media complex and their work in general. My basic approach was to reduce the volume of information through coding, identify the key patterns by categorizing the data and then construct a conceptual framework based on the data. I heeded Merriam's (1998) caution to work on data collection and analysis simultaneously to prevent the data from becoming overwhelming. After each interview I revisited the session and noted any new emerging concepts or themes and strived to give them more attention in subsequent interviews.

According to McCracken (1988) the objective of data analysis is to determine the categories, relationships and assumptions that inform the participant's perspective of his or her lived experience and the topic in particular. I came to this stage of the study with knowledge of expectations arising from the existing literature, my professional experience in sports television production at this station and a basic sense of what took place in the actual interviews and participant observation. This enabled the creation of an

initial coding legend. Overall, the coding scheme underwent three stages of refinement, which is documented in the coding scheme development chart (*Appendix B*).

Dey's (1993) initial step in preparation for the more formal analysis process is to first read and annotate all transcripts. Annotating derives from the need to record our observations and ideas about the data. I entered into this first phase of this process with an open mind, allowing the interview to "breathe and speak for itself" (Seidman, 2006, p. 117). This required a close reading of transcripts with judgment, marking what emerged as important and interesting in the data. Reading and annotating naturally led to the creation of categories and the assigning of specific data to them. Reducing the data in this manner was carried out inductively rather than deductively. This allows the patterns, themes and categories of analysis to come from the data. That qualitative data analysis moves from the particular to the general is one of its unique characteristics and I was careful to remain true to that.

As the process moved from analysis to synthesis I followed a three-step process. The first step entailed the linking of data or discovery of connections between data. While categorizing and linking are separate steps they complement each other. I identified connections between different pieces of data from the same category. Linking data is key to the derivation of an explanation for the study (Dey, 1993). Ultimately, I strived for category sets, which were "grounded" in the data.

The second step of the synthesis stage was identifying connections between categories. I compared material within categories in order to look for similarities and variations in meanings. Comparing across categories led to discovering connections

between themes. I asked myself how the categories and themes fit together. This stage of the analysis/synthesis process is a thoughtful and time-consuming phase.

The third step of this process was to integrate the themes and concepts into an interpretation of the study (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The research must ultimately reveal some significant knowledge in the area of study. The interpretation process involved establishing the current study's findings within the body of existing research and comparing and contrasting them with the most pertinent issues raised in the literature as well as with my own experience in sports television. Moving beyond the descriptive data in categories to thematic connections that provide an analysis or explanation involves a significant amount of interpretation. For Patton (1990) interpretation can mean many things: "attaching significance to what was found, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, extrapolating lessons, making inferences, building linkages, attaching meanings, imposing order, and dealing with rival explanations, disconfirming cases and data irregularities as part of testing the viability of an interpretation" (p. 423).

In short, the analysis of data is less a complex process than a continual exercise of judgment by the researcher. For Marshall (1981), judgment is the most important ingredient the researcher brings to the study. It depends upon a combination of experience both in general and experience specific to the interview subject matter. Researchers must continually affirm their own ability to recognize what is of essential interest during this process (Seidman, 2006). Based on this analysis, I was able to advance the study by considering the broader implications of this research. I formulated conclusions and developed recommendations.

I also performed what McCracken (1988) refers to as “quality control” checks by striving to exhibit the following conditions in the explanation of the data: 1) exactness so no unnecessary ambiguity exists; 2) a minimum number of assumptions while still offering explanation; 3) no assertions that contradict one another; 4) conformity to what is already known about this subject; 5) assertions that subsumed the specific within the general; and 6) explanation of as much of the data as possible without giving up accuracy while also suggesting new ideas and insights (p. 50).

### **Ethical Considerations**

As the sole researcher in this study I took full responsibility for both informing and protecting participants. It is a basic premise that participants partake in a study voluntarily and that they are fully informed about its purpose. My biggest concern was that I not exploit my relationship with this site and population, which could be characterized as friendship in many cases. I believe I effectively situated myself as a researcher in the interview environment despite my professional history with the organization and its staff. The participants’ understanding of the interview dynamic as well as their willingness to be open with me even when discussing one of the more sensitive question areas, that of the challenges of objectivity considering their station’s ownership situation, helped me achieve this. Furthermore, as regular practitioners of the interview, they all seemed to enjoy being on the other end of the interviewing process.

Heyl (2001) stresses the imperative to listen well and respectfully in order to develop an ethical engagement with the participants at all stages of the study. Here we were dealing with the issues of reciprocity and equity in the interview relationship

(Seidman, 2006, p.109). Reciprocity centers on the fact that the researcher generally gains much more from the process than the participant (Patai, 1987; Yow, 1994). Researchers have discussed the importance of taking the participant seriously and valuing their words to minimize this disparity in reciprocity. Seidman (2006) attempts to offer reciprocity through his interest in a participant's experience, listening intently to what he or she is saying and honoring both when he presents his or her story to the larger public. He considers being equitable the First Commandment of interviewing. Seidman defines equity as the "balance between means and ends, between what is sought and what is given, between process and product, and a sense of fairness and justice that pervades the relationship between participant and interviewer" (p. 110). To Seidman, bringing equity to the relationship requires above all else a respect for the dignity of those interviewed and studied.

Considering the researcher's position is already a privileged one, I was careful to remain conscious of my unique relationship to the organization and participants and how that could potentially negatively impact both. This is where my practice of reflexivity was most prominent. I practiced reflexivity via the writing down of my thoughts and observations following each data collection period. I then took care to review these notes, reflect upon them, sometimes discuss my observations or concerns with fellow researchers, and then adjust any behavior accordingly.

Another challenge I faced is best described anecdotally. On one of several occasions where I was shadowing the station's beat reporter for the city's professional football team a unique situation was discussed between the reporter and the team's media relations director. A newly signed high-profile athlete recently released from prison had

been off-limits to the media since his introductory press conference. The station's reporter suggested to the media relations director that the player be made available even if it was necessary to limit the interview to "football-only" questions. The media relations director was reluctant to restrict what reporters could and could not ask and asked me for my opinion on the proposal. I politely refused to respond citing my desire to remain uninvolved in the proceedings. I made every effort to remain uninvolved in the activities I was privy to except for the opportunities I had to interview players in an attempt to truly embrace data collection as a participant observer.

Although this study did not involve any serious threats to participants or their well-being, measures were taken to protect those who took part. First, implied consent forms with all IRB-approved information pertinent to participants and their rights were distributed to each participant. This followed my informing participants in person about the purpose of the study. Second, participants' interests were considered the top priority for the purposes of reporting the findings and analysis of this study. The names and other key identity characteristics of participants and the media organization in this study were kept confidential. Furthermore, all data – both interviews and fieldnotes – were securely stored and nobody other than the transcriptionist and myself had access to this material.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Issues of trustworthiness refer to any efforts by the qualitative researcher to address the more quantitative issues of validity and reliability. Guba and Lincoln (1998) argue that the trustworthiness of a qualitative study should be assessed differently from its quantitative counterpart. The pair established the criteria of *credibility*, *dependability*,

*confirmability*, and *transferability* to assess this key issue of qualitative research. The objective is for the qualitative researcher to be forthcoming about all assumptions and to be vigilant of any potential biases that might arise throughout all phases of the study.

Credibility, otherwise known as validity, addresses the findings' accuracy and credibility from the perspective of the researcher, the participants and the reader. Credibility must be a key factor in determining the research design (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Merriam, 1998; Creswell, 2003). This criterion requires a concern with both methodological and interpretive validity (Mason, 1996). Methodological validity involves questioning how appropriate the research design is considering the research questions being posed as well as the type of explanation the researcher is attempting to produce. Interpretive validity is concerned with the validity of the data analysis and the interpretation it is based upon.

Measures I took to strengthen the methodological validity of the study included gathering data from multiple sources, also known as triangulation, and the use of more than one data collection technique. Data gathered from multiple sources and a variety of methods naturally increase credibility. I also evaluated the quality of the interview data following interviews using Kvale's (1996) criteria, which include (1) the extent of spontaneous, rich, specific, and relevant answers from the participant, (2) the need for shorter interviewer questions, as opposed to longer participant answers, which signify a higher quality interview, (3) the degree of success in following up and clarifying the meanings of the relevant aspects of responses, (4) the need to interpret the interview throughout the interview, not once it has ended, (5) the attempts to verify my interpretations of the participant's answers in the course of the interview, and (6) the



degree to which the interview is “self-communicating,” meaning it is a story contained in itself without much need for elaboration in the form of additional descriptions or explanations.

My attempts to improve the interpretive validity of this study also included various strategies. First, I openly acknowledged my assumptions from the outset and the steps through which interpretations were made were transparent and documented. Second, I employed member checks. The findings were taken back to participants as a way of ensuring that the reality of the participants was sufficiently addressed. Finally, I also employed peer review through the review and discussion of findings with professional colleagues, most notably my dissertation adviser, as a method for challenging my particular perspective on the findings and subject matter.

Dependability is used in place of the more traditional quantitative measure of reliability, or how easily the research findings can be replicated by other studies. Lincoln and Guba (1985) contend that the more crucial issue is whether the findings are consistent with the data collected and thus dependable. The need to identify inconsistencies is imperative during the analysis phase of the study. Researchers can enhance dependability through the documentation of their procedures and through demonstrating that coding schemes and categories were consistent.

In order to establish dependability, I kept an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The audit trail documents the thought process behind my interpretation as well as the reasoning for all choices and decisions made during the research process. I did this by recording memos detailing how all of the data was analyzed and interpreted.

The goal of confirmability is to instill confidence that the findings are not the result of the biases and subjectivity of the researcher. The need for transparency is crucial to allow the public to judge for themselves. Qualitative researchers must practice reflexivity in this regard and illustrate how their data can be followed back to its origins. Once again Lincoln and Guba's (1985) audit trail proved useful for demonstrating this. Toward this end, I also maintained a record of fieldnotes and transcripts so that the reader can evaluate the findings. Member checks also contribute to the confirmability of this study.

Qualitative research never lists generalizability as one of its goals. What is addressed is the issue of transferability or the ways in which the audience is enabled to determine the extent to which the phenomenon in the particular context of the study can transfer to another specific context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). My attempts to achieve transferability involved my attempts to allow participants to speak for themselves as much as possible and the inclusion of contextual information and other details. The amount of detail provided forms the foundation for a qualitative study's claim to applicability in a more general context (Schram, 2003).

### **Limitations**

As with any research project, this study has its limitations. Some of these are specific to this study and others are inherent to qualitative research. I gave careful consideration to all possible options for lessening the effect of these limitations on the results of this study.

One of these is that the analysis of the data is based solely upon my own subjectivity. Researcher bias is perhaps the foremost concern in qualitative research because of its potential for framing assumptions, perceptions, and other aspects of the study from a very specific point of view. The issue of subjectivity regarding my own professional experience as a field producer at the very regional sports channel in this study must be considered a primary limitation.

The second limitation involves a phenomenon referred to by Maxwell (1996) as *participant reactivity*. Because many of the participants knew me first as a co-worker, our existing relationship may have acted upon their responses to my questions. In other words they may have tried too hard to give me responses they believed I was seeking or believed might be most helpful to me.

My efforts to deal with these limitations included the following measures. First, I acknowledged my research agenda and stated my assumptions at the outset of the study. In order to address the issue of participant reactivity, I practiced reflexivity; I attempted to account for the ways in which I might be influencing participants and worked to eliminate those elements from interview sessions. I also strove to convey to participants the importance of honesty and openness in our interactions. Prior interviewing experience was helpful in this regard.

A further limitation of this study revolves around the limited access available to me within the professional sports franchises the study's participants covered on a regular basis. The strict adherence to restricting the amount of information known about the inner workings of franchises as well as their paranoia regarding strategy and personnel matters makes this a difficult limitation to overcome. This element as it impacts the reporter-

source dynamic and the reporter's work in general will be discussed in further detail. Also, studies on professional sports franchises, while extremely difficult to carry out, will be suggested as an important area for future research in chapter five.

A final important limitation is that the research sample was restricted. A critique of this research might be the limited possibility of generalizing this study to other sports media organizations; however, generalizability is never the goal of qualitative research. What the researcher strives for is the concept of transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative researchers employing ethnographic techniques include as much detail as possible in large part so that other scholars and researchers can evaluate the knowledge produced for its suitability to their research. Furthermore, this project is not undertaken to confirm or refute earlier findings but to contribute to a process of continuous revision and enrichment of understanding of the reporter-source relationship in the sports-media complex (Lincoln, 1995).

## **Chapter Four**

### **Research Findings**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter presents the principal findings obtained from 14 long interviews (McCracken, 1988) and a variety of informal interviews. Participant observation fieldwork was also conducted during training camps, practices and game days with the market's professional football, baseball and basketball teams from July to December. Three major findings emerged from the study:

1. The sports television reporters in this study perceive their relationship with information sources, fans, and the ownership of their station and the sports teams they cover as becoming increasingly difficult and complex.
  
2. The participants believe identity outside of the ideal (white and male) translates to improved access with sources, particularly athletes.
  
3. Participants perceive new technologies as diminishing their privileged position in the sports arena and affecting the work they are asked to perform in their role as reporter.

What follows is a discussion of the findings including specific aspects that illustrate and support each. My intention was to detail the variety of participant attitudes, experiences, values, and beliefs. The hope here is that such an approach reveals the richness of the research subject and enables the reader to better comprehend the reality of the participants. Quotations from interview transcripts emphasize the importance I attached to allowing participants to speak for themselves. Other data such as observations from fieldwork are also used to enhance and further support the discussion.

*Finding 1: The sports television reporters in this study perceive their relationship to information sources, fans, and the ownership of their station and the sports teams they cover as becoming increasingly difficult and complex.*

### **Relationship to Sources**

Those participants who had been working as sports reporters for more than a year stated that their relationships with sources, most notably athletes, had been changing significantly since they first entered the sports media. Only the beat reporters at the station were less inclined to see a dramatic diminishing of their ability to gain ample access to sources and to establish a rapport with them. This was largely the product of their daily contact with the team. The reporters in this study repeatedly described their relationship with athletes as becoming increasingly impersonal and strained. This was a situation they lamented because of the importance of these sources to their jobs and pleasing the audience. As athletes and franchises have been able to exert more control over the reporter-source relationship, a shift in the type of coverage and stories that reporters produce has followed. As a result, participants in this study referred to their role as reporter as covering a “product” or “brand.” Participants appeared to be resigned to this situation and did not openly voice their displeasure with it.

Multiple reasons were given for this deterioration of the relationship. Participants most frequently identified the ever-increasing number of media as a major culprit. Participants such as Larry, a 63-year-old reporter who has worked in the sports media in this market for 40 years, bemoaned the lack of one-on-one interaction that characterizes the contemporary reporter-source relationship especially when compared to interactions with athletes and coaches as recently as 15 or 20 years ago:

You got private time with them. If you needed to talk to a guy one on one it was easy to do...it wasn't these mass press conferences so it was a lot easier to get information. A coach or a player could answer a question very frankly, say look, off the record, here's what happened on that play, and they will tell you... If there's only a small group of guys there and he knows everybody he can say that and 'off the record' means 'off the record' and it's fine and you find out what really happened. You can't go off the record in a room full of 200 reporters with live television. In that sense, back then, I felt it was just easier to develop a relationship and a trust with the athletes and coaches and it was just easier to get to what was really going on.

The sheer volume of sports media has led to more stringent access policies in locker rooms and clubhouses, which also contributes to the lack of personal interaction. The media can often be found standing around the locker room or clubhouse talking among themselves rather than to players or other team personnel. Player availability, and to an even greater degree, coaches' availability, is more limited now than ever before. The deadline-driven media environment also begets a "get in and get out" mentality, which further contributes to a climate of impersonality. Following games, and to a lesser degree practices, pack journalism is the norm. Even with rules and regulations in place, many players are still bombarded by wave after wave of media at their lockers.

A method being employed more and more frequently by franchises in an attempt to ameliorate this problem is the use of the podium press conference. Participants have come to accept this relatively recent shift without much protest despite the complications it creates. The press conference has become the preferred method for making the most highly sought-after players and coaches available to large numbers of media. While the press conference does alleviate congestion in the locker room and cuts down on the considerable demands made of the most popular interviewees, it remains impersonal as far as ideal reporter-source interactions go. Interview sessions are always strictly timed and an announcement stating that only two more questions will be taken from the media

is made. In this interview format, the interviewee controls the interaction. From an elevated position removed from the media, more personalized interaction is not possible. Furthermore, the player or coach can much more easily dismiss a line of questioning, choose whose questions to answer, and reporters are much less likely to be able to ask follow-up questions. The former is once again largely the result of the large number of reporters, all of them competing to get their question taken by the interviewee. Participants specifically acknowledged this development as having an adverse effect on their ability to cultivate meaningful relationships with these types of sources.

Sports franchises and individual players and coaches or other personnel also attempt to leverage control by not speaking with the media. The impact of the growing reticence of the information source on reporters is significant. In addition to managing the various personalities and attitudes of the athletes they cover, reporters said they proceed with a more measured approach than ever before in their interactions. Those times when the reporter chooses to employ a more incisive line of questioning must be chosen very carefully:

**Abigail:** You don't want to be that person that's always, I always call it having a Mike Wallace moment, where you're always digging for something bigger. If you're that person and they know you as that person, when you walk into the clubhouse or the locker room, they're gonna have I would think a colder approach to you. Not to say they wouldn't talk to you but I think they would have a colder approach. If that's your tone all of the time.

The result of more guarded sources is the lack of rapport necessary to develop a valuable relationship, as well as much less forthcoming responses:

**Jay:** There's only so much you can do sometimes if it's in the locker room and a guy's pissed off. Which they are most of the time. It's not like you're gonna have the guy smiling at you 'hey great! Can't wait to talk to you guys.' So it's mostly just a, can't wait to get this over with attitude which sucks for us cause sound bites aren't gonna be as good.



Athletes have also become more skilled at avoiding the media altogether. They may hide out in the trainer's room or request they be allowed to shower before being interviewed only to remain in the shower until the locker room is closed to the media. The new stadiums and practice facilities being constructed appear to be designed with the athlete's avoidance of the media in mind; participants noted that hiding places are much more numerous. Furthermore, the layout of these facilities may leave journalists feeling as though they are intruders on the players' turf.

Franchises have become even more proficient at dealing with the media, according to participants. Don described the relationship he has built with the city's football team and their efforts to manage him and other media:

Management types are more leery of the media than the actual athletes. Management structure, you know, whatever people may think, front office personnel watch and read everything. They may tell you, 'we don't read this' - that's a lie. They do. They know it's out there and if they're not watching it and if they're not reading it, if they're not listening to it on the radio they have people closely associated to them that it is part of their job to read all of this stuff and watch all of this stuff and give them feedback. So they know what's out there and they'll test you and once they feel they can trust you they'll tell you a little bit more. And then of course there's sometime that you have to give them something back in return. So there have been times where I've had to cross that line and give them something, a heads-up on something that a certain individual might be thinking about in terms of... 'I'm gonna hold out.' You may give them one or two tidbits there and when you play ball with them like that they're more inclined to give you a little bit more down the stretch.

Professional sports organizations are increasingly secretive about a myriad of subjects, especially strategic information such as player injuries and trades. However, any other information that might compromise the organization's position or might place the team in a negative light is also fiercely protected:

**Deb:** Part of the paranoia is like, nobody wants anybody to know the secrets. This is how we get it done. We can tell you practice was great and everybody worked hard and you know when in fact, so and so was 10 minutes late and the other so and so couldn't buy a basket and part of it was cause he looked like he was hung

over or whatever. But if you don't see it, you can just take anything they say. That's why every practice is closed.

**Lisa:** There is no more tight-lipped organization, I don't think, in baseball right now than the [market's baseball team]. You never hear anything that's coming out until it's done. They just don't talk about it, it's a big rule of [the general manager's]. There were a couple of guys that aren't there anymore that were notorious for talking, [the former assistant general manager] was one of them and he was a source for one of the guys who doesn't break stories as much anymore as he used to. And [a former manager] was another and he leaked things to people too.

Participants have observed more manipulation on the part of sports franchises and their personnel. Don, a beat reporter who covers the city's football team, counts the team's president as an information source. At times this source's manipulation is overt, such as when he calls the regional sports channel's news director, general manager or even the president to attempt to influence editorial decisions. Other times his efforts are more subtle. Don explained that the team president frequently accuses him of always taking the players' side during contract negotiations and other player issues. Don is aware that these are attempts to influence his coverage of such stories, and he deals with this high-level source accordingly.

Organizational culture and philosophy regarding how to deal with the media differs greatly from team to team, something that is certainly true of the sports teams in the television market in this study. Participants unanimously chose hockey as their favorite sport to cover. The city's baseball team was widely acknowledged as the most difficult. Participants often referred to covering the baseball team as "the worst job there is." Participants also said that there is a direct correlation between the success and popularity of a franchise and the amount of power that franchise attempts to wield in their media relations:

**Tom:** Yeah you know on certain teams it's not pretty. The reality is that specifically in this city there is, there has been for a very, very long time an uber-team and then everybody else was kind of following along. And for the first time since you know I've been doing this, there's another team nipping at that first team's heels and that first team is beyond concern about their image, about the stories that are reported about them and to a bigger extent, very concerned about the layout of the newspaper and/or in our case, the television coverage in terms of what's our lead story and how much time are we dedicating to their team versus this team that has suddenly gotten hot, very popular and people are - that's you know, a different thing for us.

Participants detailed the publicity battle waged between the city's football and baseball teams as they vie for supremacy. Both are very willing to use their clout to attempt to influence not only the stories being covered but the placement and the amount of coverage being devoted to them as well. Instances of well-timed announcements are commonplace in an attempt to upstage the competitor for sports publicity. This development shows a much higher level of media acumen than the media had perhaps come to expect from professional sports franchises.

Franchise restrictions on media privileges continue to increase. Participants also perceived the root of this as a direct result of the sheer number of sports media clamoring for more and more access to players and coaches. One organizational method of extending control of team information is through the adoption of more stringent policies regarding availability of players, coaches and other team personnel as well as other rules and regulations designed to curtail media access. Each sporting association or organization handles the media and their access privileges differently. Many reporters considered NFL teams to be the most restrictive. The local football franchise permits interviews with coaches and star players such as the quarterback once a week in addition to the standard post-game interview availability. The team opens the locker room, where the rest of the team is to be available for interviewing, for sometimes as little as 20

minutes following practices. Media relations personnel keep close track of the timed sessions and clearly announce to the locker room to finish up before escorting them to the facility's media work area. Following the signing of one very high-profile football player during the 2009 preseason, access was completely restricted to that player for several weeks until he and the team were willing to grant interview requests but only on their terms. This was a rare case, according to participants, because of an unusual legal situation surrounding this player. However, it does illustrate the lengths a team will go to in order to protect the player, and thus the franchise, by ensuring they are not exposing them to any potentially negative situations.

Players, coaches and franchises also understand the power of sanctions in sending a message to the media. Franchises will often use sanctions or the threat of sanctions to enforce their rules and regulations. The sports channel in this study had never had their press credentials revoked, the most drastic measure at an franchise's disposal. However, teams had frequently refused interview requests or pulled out of show appearances or other commitments in an effort to send a message that certain behaviors or coverage would not be tolerated. Moreover, teams are more willing than ever to adopt extremely restrictive policies to be followed. For instance, the city's football franchise 2009 media passes serve notice to guests that "the [team] reserve the right to revoke the privileges granted by the pass at any time for any reason whatsoever." While such a drastic measure is rarely if ever taken, it hangs over reporters' heads. Participants said that such sanctions have an impact on how they approach their jobs mainly because any reporter without access to the most desirable sources for an extended period of time will struggle to do his or her job. The lack of such sources even for one day, especially if a competitor has them,

significantly detracts from the newsworthiness of that day's content and could potentially alienate the demanding sports viewing audience.

Players may go beyond revoking access in the form of granting an interview to actually threatening reporters with physical sanctions. Several participants had witnessed physical confrontations although they were not involved in them personally. Chris was the lone participant who had such an encounter with an athlete. A professional basketball player came after him but others nearby stepped in to prevent it escalating into a physical confrontation. This was the only instance of a threat of physical sanction toward a participant in this study. The vast majority of the time, players are simply standoffish and refuse to speak but they rarely resort to physical intimidation.

The most common method of communication between reporters and sources in the contemporary sports media landscape is text messaging, or simply texting, via cellular telephones. Chris, who has been working in the local sports television market for over 15 years, said that not only is face-to-face communication on the decline but now actually speaking with many information sources is, too.

You don't call athletes anymore, you text them. And coaches pretty much the same, athletes today, agents. An agent texted me today. They're all text. It's all text. And it's so impersonal. I'd rather talk to a guy or, when I have to see someone up here, I don't email them, I walk up and I go and I talk to them. That's just my style but it's definitely changed the way we do things.

Lack of trust on the part of the athlete was frequently named as the central reason for the growing strain that characterizes the present-day reporter-athlete relationship. Participants such as Jim, the network's 39-year-old beat reporter for the city's hockey team, believe trust is built through consistency. This favors beat reporters as opposed to those reporters who are only assigned to cover a team on a more irregular basis:

Trust is only built by seeing that you're there. So many athletes over the years will say, 'you're not there.' They want to know that you're there. They want to see you at practice, they want to see you at games, on the road, at home.... if they see you, they get to know you on a first-name basis. In order to have that trust, it's like any relationship, whatever you put into it is what you're gonna get out of it. If you don't have time or you're not given time to put that sort of time into a relationship, it's not gonna be reciprocated. And I think now more than ever with, especially with their demands....It's just blown to a level to where they don't remember names, they don't know who you're with, they don't know what entity you're with and so, it makes it even more tougher now.

Distrust develops for a variety of reasons, according to participants. Many athletes have been "burned" by the media in the past such as with their comments being taken out of context. Some athletes take umbrage with the content of the media's coverage or what they perceive as overly critical or negative reporting. A participant described the difficulty this presents for reporters:

**Jim:** There's gonna be negative stories, there's gonna be positive stories. If you're not playing well, that'll be reported. If you're playing well, that will be reported. Unfortunately, it's typically the negative stuff that obviously gets brought to the forefront. It's like, if you were to make ten remarks towards your wife and nine of them were positive and one thing was really negative, what's gonna stick out? It's gonna be the negative. Same thing about what we do and the stories that we present. The negative is always going to supersede anything positive that you say.

Athletes have also become distrustful of the media because of what they consider intrusions into their private lives:

**Larry:** They don't understand why that has to be in the paper. 'Where I go at night, what's that have to do with my role on the team?' So the players will always resent those sorts of things that they deem intrusive. But with the kind of press that we have now, they're going to want that. To them that's part of the story too. That's part of your story too. And I think that's the area where you're gonna see the real conflict now, and you're seeing it with Tiger [Woods] obviously, is this whole idea of what's fair and what's not fair. What's in play and what's not in play as far as the athlete and his life. How much privacy is he entitled to versus what is the public's right to know?

From the reporter's perspective, athletes tire of the questioning itself, especially uninformed and repetitive queries. Participants believed this is particularly true for baseball players who must deal with the media on a daily basis for months at a time. The city's baseball team in this study was overwhelmingly considered the least cooperative of the major sports franchises in the market. Still other athletes resent being criticized by reporters who can't possibly fathom what it is like to be that exceptional on the field of play. A participant described the tension this creates:

**Robert:** I think from an athlete's perspective, these guys are one in a billion, if I may exaggerate the point. There are so few people doing what they do for a living, you have to be highly trained, highly skilled, highly focused to excel at the level in which they excel that...I wouldn't be surprised if a great number of them say 'you don't understand my world, you don't understand what it is that motivates me, that triggers me and that makes me successful.'

Participants also identified the celebrity lifestyles many athletes lead today as preventing members of the media from relating to the contemporary athlete as well as they were once able to:

**Jim:** They separate themselves from the rest of society in the sense that, it's hard for them to relate. Their lives - a lot of athletes don't know how to balance checkbooks, they don't grocery shop, they don't do all the little things that most of us do in our daily lives - so it's all a part of being able to relate to us. And it makes it harder and harder to relate when you have athletes making millions and millions of dollars who live a different sort of lifestyle than the rest of us live....How do you relate to million-dollar athletes? And because of that...The media serves no need, no purpose, provides no service to them because they already have it all. They've got the money and they've got fans and they've got the big house and all this and so they really don't see any reason to why they need to come in contact with us.

Some participants were sympathetic toward the pressures athletes are under, but the majority was frustrated with the tension that exists between themselves and these crucial information sources. None of the participants believed the relationship between reporters and athletes would get better. At best, some thought the level of tension would

remain the same. The majority envisioned the reporter-athlete relationship continuing to worsen. Participants were very aware of the repercussions of relationships that lack the personal interaction and rapport vital to establishing trust. They drew a direct connection between meaningful personal interaction and lasting, fruitful reporter-source relationships. Participants agreed that beat reporters are best positioned to develop the relationships necessary to thrive in the contemporary sports media newsgathering environment:

**Chris:** It's every day you're there in the clubhouse. It's every day. So they develop a little bit of a rapport with players and they have certain guys they can go to....I did (covered) them [the baseball team] probably about three or four times this year....They don't want to deal with me. What do they want to deal with me for? So it has a negative in that regard because they don't want to deal with me. Lisa [the regular beat reporter] might go and she knows that [an outfielder] has a good rapport with her....now these guys might know who I am and maybe I might get lucky but generally it's gonna be easier for the beat reporter they see every day.

### **Evolving Information Sources**

The reporters in this study detailed one particularly noteworthy adaptation of their newsgathering methods because of the persisting fraying of the reporter-athlete relationship during their tenures. The reporters discussed the need to cultivate alternative information sources, which predominantly include player agents and analysts or experts in order to deal with the changes in their relationship with athletes and the teams they cover in general.

Player agents are information sources that have proliferated in the past five to ten years. Some longer-tenured reporters stated that agents were a “weakness” among the information sources they had cultivated over the years while younger reporters considered the player agent an indispensable asset to their work. Not all agents may be



willing to be quoted or enjoy the media aspect of their job but most are amenable to developing a relationship with reporters. Participants described willing player agents as extremely media savvy and as having one agenda, which is feeding reporters information that benefits their clients (which ultimately benefits themselves). Player agents were also viewed as savvy across the entire range of media including new and social media. Reporters valued agents for several important reasons. Abigail, a 32-year-old reporter who has worked for the network for three years, said agents possess knowledge of what are generally the most newsworthy stories:

When it comes to trades, when it comes to injuries and when it comes to clients and overall unhappiness, which those are the three big things as far as newsmakers, those are the guys that are gonna tell you everything and agents are...they love to be the talk box for their clients, so, I mean, for me, that's always been my number one source.

A second value of agents to reporters lies in their ability to enable reporters to force sports organizations to address key issues, such as trades and player unhappiness, about which teams have become increasingly uncommunicative. Don, a 51-year-old professional football beat reporter, described how he has succeeded in getting the football team's management to abandon its tight-lipped ways:

Because athletes and their agents consistently came to me, it kind of forced management out of the woods so to speak, because they got tired of getting their brains beat out by players and agents telling one side of the story. So their way of retaliating is saying look, if they're gonna do this then doggone it I'm tired of this, here's the story. So now you're finally getting it and when you tell both sides of that story, you leave it to the viewer to decide who they want to believe.

Agents are also valuable to reporters because they transcend the reporter's local market. More than any other source in a specific market, the agent possesses the potential to remain a source for the reporter if he or she were to change jobs and move to a new

city. This may help explain why younger reporters were more eager to develop agents as information sources.

A second information source, whose use is now more commonplace at this regional sports channel since it began operations 12 years ago, is the analyst. Sometimes referred to as experts or insiders, these sources are on the company's payroll and their appearances are booked on specific shows. Others are simply spoken to or interviewed out in the field at events. These sources may appear on pregame or postgame shows that supplement a live sporting event or they may appear on segments devoted to specific topics within a news show or roundtable discussion program. Often former players or coaches, analysts are generally asked to offer their "expert" opinion on topics the team or players are not forthcoming about, including strategy, player performance or team personnel decisions. Tom, a field producer as well as the 36-year-old assistant news director, said other times these types of sources are simply used for their ability to provide more interesting or engaging television:

You interview other media members who interview athletes. Literally just to fill out content but also in large part because athletes generally are trained not to say anything and they're pretty good at it and they don't so at this point you're almost...you almost sort of have to go that way you know. Cause you want to get something you find compelling on television.

This is where media interpretation is most prominently introduced into the network's programming. The role of the analyst is to stay abreast of the most recent developments in the league and remain well connected to the teams, including management, coaches and players. Analysts are valued in part because they enable the media outlet to establish a certain level of expertise and because they also offer opportunities for promotion:

**Tom:** We're debating this whole issue of what is going on in the NFL called the Wildcat. And he [the analyst] was on one of our shows and he said, "the way the [city's football team] run it right now is going to be the genesis of a new NFL offense. This thing is gonna revolutionize football"...I don't think I believe that, but I guarantee I'm gonna watch to see if he's right. Cause if he's right, I'm gonna run that again and again and again and tell you - hey, we told you this two, three, four years ago.

These concerted efforts by the newsgatherers at this station to negotiate the evolving sports media landscape through the development of alternative information sources is further evidence of participants' understanding of the deteriorating reporter-athlete relationship as problematic to their work.

### **Relationship to Fans**

The sports television reporters in this study view themselves as fans, albeit with resources the average fan does not have. The participants also viewed themselves as mediators between the fan and athletes and their teams. While a couple of participants specifically approach their newsgathering and production of show material from the perspective of 'what do I want to know about the players, team or game,' all of the participants said they consider the interests and desires of the fan at home vital to their day-to-day work. Gene, the lone reporter at the station who was born and raised in the sports television market in this study, suggested the reporter's role actually requires being a fan:

Viewers want to watch people who are fans. That's what I think. Someone at home loves the fact that I'm rooting for the [baseball team] as hard as they are. So in that respect...I mean, our job is to get people to watch and in essence to like us. I think being a fan, especially in a town like [this city], really ingratiates us to the fans at home. I think people like that.

Other participants looked at their role as acting as a sort of elected official; they feel a sense of accountability to fan expectations as well as duty-bound to represent the fans' interests:

**Robert:** It's not the source, it's not the reporter, it's the viewer. The singular viewer. Not the masses of viewers because people have different likes and dislikes but you have to approach it with, what do I believe the viewer wants and expects from me? And I have to be responsible to that.

**Don:** Not only am I working, I'm also a fan. Anybody who tells you in this business they're not a fan they're lying to you. [people] have told me, 'man you asked a question what I was sitting at home thinking about. Thanks for asking that question cause I was thinking the same thing.' Sure. I go in a lot of times thinking okay, 'what would Joe Blow want to hear?' In terms of me asking a question. Whether it's a hard-core question. Whether it's a colorful question and a comical question - what do you think they would want to hear? So you're not only representing yourself, you're representing the people who don't have access to these guys like you do.

It is this view of their reporter role that illustrates participants' recognition that their relationship with sources is connected to their relationship with fans. Reporters' perception of themselves as fans/mediators enables them to feel as though they have their finger on the pulse of fan tastes. In this role, participants consistently noted the prominence of sports stars and the belief that reporters, then, were essentially obliged to treat athletes as celebrities:

**Gene:** These athletes, right or wrong, are making millions and millions of dollars and living lifestyles that put them I guess on the same plane as Hollywood superstars and actually some of them try to become you know, the worlds mesh in a lot of ways. But what they don't understand I guess or what they didn't understand maybe when they got into it is, if you're gonna live like a Hollywood superstar you're gonna be treated like one by the press. I don't think sportscasters report on that kind of stuff, I certainly don't. But yeah, rumors, innuendos whether it be their love lives or crime and punishment and all that stuff, yeah, everyone's real quick to point out.

Participants pointed to the Internet as the main culprit for the turn toward stories on athletes' private lives, which are often fueled by rumor and innuendo. According to

more experienced reporters, rumor and gossip have always been around but it was only traded among those in the media and rarely circulated to the public-at-large. Today, not only do the media feel more compelled than ever to publish such information but the Internet provides an ideal avenue that did not previously exist for getting such information out to a mass audience. One instance frequently brought up by participants involved a member of the city's baseball team. An Internet blogger suggested the player's high level of play early in the 2009 season was the result of performance-enhancing drugs. After the national media as well as the city's newspaper picked up the relatively unknown blogger's post it became a "must cover" story for the station. Reporters bemoaned this incident and others like it because they place them in difficult situations with not only the player/coach in question but his teammates as well who despise such negative stories, especially those based purely on conjecture. As far as participants were concerned, such incidents play a significant role in feeding the distrust between the media and athletes, coaches and franchises.

Further complicating this issue, the network's website has added its own "Truth and Rumors" page devoted to the publication of rumors involving players on the market's professional sports teams. Tom, the station's assistant news director, said that one reason for the addition of this type of content is the belief that gossip stories are a way to add the female demographic to sports news, long a male-dominated arena. Tom openly worried about the distinct possibility that ratings and page views were becoming privileged over the integrity of the channel's news operation. This is where the disconnect between the reporter as fan and reporter as journalist was most visible. A definite tension exists

between the participants' desire to operate within journalistic norms and values while also incorporating the element of entertainment vital to attracting an audience:

**Gene:** Our job definitely has a level of entertainment and I think you can use that. You can't be, people don't like homers either. It is one of those, people want a guy that cares as much about the team as much as they do but when they see something wrong, will criticize just like they do. I think that's why sports radio is so popular. Because you've got guys on there that have great personalities and can root for these teams but also can blast the teams when they have to. So, I think as long as you use it the right way, I think being a fan can help. It does make it a little trickier but you know it's not rocket science.

**Tom:** In the end, and I try to tell this to everybody that I send out in the field, that we are covering sports. The intention here is to try and have some fun with it. That's not to say that there aren't serious matters and things that come up but you know, we are trying to entertain people, hopefully with sports and hopefully people like sports and have fun with it so that's really what we're after.

As part of this tension, many participants expressed their distaste for the move toward content involving rumor and gossip. The use of rumor and gossip as viable content for today's sports media is directly connected to the issue of what is off limits regarding players' and coaches' personal lives. Larry, who covers the city's football team for the network including the website, said leaving the privacy issue undefined further contributes to a high level of distrust between athletes and media outlets:

This is where the battleground is gonna be, is this whole area of lifestyle reporting and the players saying 'no, I should be able and entitled to live my own life as I want without you guys looking over my shoulder' and the press saying 'no, as long as you are who you are we're gonna look over your shoulder.' What happens on the field, being an athlete or a coach or part of the team, I think the player even though he might not like you to criticize him, he understands that that's part of the deal. If I screw up in a game, if I fumble, if I throw an interception, if I play lousy you're gonna rip me. And they're not gonna like it but they can't say too much about it because they understand that that's part of what you do. But the other stuff is the stuff that they've always had trouble understanding and they will always have trouble understanding and it's only gonna get worse because there's more and more media looking for exactly that sort of stuff.

The reporter as fan is being placed in a precarious position because of the growing prevalence of rumor and gossip in the sports media and the fans' reaction to it. Reporters must negotiate the responsibility they feel toward the fans' desires while also maintaining their relationship with the sports star celebrities they cover for a living. These sports television reporters understood that they must walk a fine line between the entertainment aspect of their job and the journalistic values they hold dear.

### **Relationship to Ownership**

Participants' perception of their role in relationship to ownership, both their bosses and those of the city's sports franchises, is one they also view as becoming increasingly complicated. This relationship is fraught with more conflicts of interest than ever before. The company that owns the regional sports channel in this study partially owns the city's professional basketball and hockey franchises. The network is the official broadcast partner of the professional baseball, basketball and hockey teams. The channel also has a marketing partnership with the city's professional football team and devotes extensive content and coverage to the football team as well. All participants were very forthcoming in discussing how the station's specific ownership/partnership situation complicates and influences the manner in which they do their jobs, whether subtle and unconscious in some cases or overt and willful in others:

**Gene:** Because this is anonymous I can say this but being owned by two of the major teams in town, certainly has its effect. It doesn't go as far as preventing us from reporting good news or bad news but, we definitely, if we were a separate entity we would take less consideration in the are we gonna piss people off with this information? Or how do we do it so that we lessen the impact? In our business it's a slippery slope. And even other teams that don't have a vested interest, we have partnerships with and to be viable as a sports entity in [this city] you need to have partnership, you need to be doing stuff with the [football team]

or with the [baseball team] so you need to have a good relationship and there's a fine line between keeping a good relationship and still reporting the news. I think we do as good of a job as you can do.

Most frequently noted as a consideration was the channel's need to go to great lengths to give a story what it refers to as "balance." Oftentimes it is balance from the perspective of the sports franchise. Tom, who has worked for the network since it began operating in 1997, said the combination of the teams' close monitoring of the station's content with the station's need to appease all of the sports teams it is so closely connected to often has a ripple effect:

So, when there's a major story related to the [hockey team] and it's not necessarily positive, we have to try as best as we possibly can to give it balance. Okay? So that if it's not positive for the [hockey team], their team has its say as well, okay. The same thing with the [basketball team]....and the [baseball team] too. But when that occurs the other team is unbelievably aware of that so when something negative occurs about their team, we have to bend over backwards too to make sure they have their spin as well. Because, if we do it for one, we have to do it for all, it's just part in parcel of the deal.

The news organization's ownership situation also begets what are referred to as "must shoots." For instance, when the chairman of the company attends a charity event, the network is obliged to send a photojournalist to shoot the event. It is also a standing rule that such stories must be aired during the half-hour news shows the network produces. While those in the newsroom may feel that the time used to air such a story might best be used elsewhere in the show, they have come to accept the situation and consider it not "biting the hand that feeds you."

The reporters and field producers insisted that their editorial decision-making is not questioned on a day-to-day basis and that they have more freedom than most people thought they would when the network was first launched. However, two specific instances were frequently cited as outright ownership interjection on behalf of corporate,



rather than journalistic, interests. Both involved teams, owned by the station's ownership company, trading away star players and the subsequent coverage of those blockbuster deals. Tom discussed the most recent incident, which involved the trading away of the city's star basketball player. The station devoted the dominant portion of its news/highlight show that evening to the star player with little mention of the players he was traded for. This quickly became a source of consternation for the city's professional basketball team and thus ownership:

We did triple our [television ratings] number that night, the night he got traded. It was insane, the amount of people we had, for an hour-long show in which we did nothing but [discuss this star basketball player] but when it was over it was not pretty cause it was like, you didn't even think to. And the argument from us was, we did. We begged for your coach to talk about the new guy, he wouldn't walk out and talk. The new guy is in [another city] and we called you to get him on the phone he said, 'I'm not interested.' But meanwhile you traded the most fascinating, compelling, and interesting athlete of the last decade and I have ten years worth of tape on him. What, am I supposed to forget that? You know I got to put that on. But it did, that caused a lot of controversy.

In at least one of the instances involving the trading of a star player, participants said the threat of being fired for producing coverage that could be considered to focus too much and too positively on the departing player was hung over the newsroom staff. While such situations as the one detailed above often placed reporters in the middle of the conflict of interest, participants also believe they are often bypassed by team management for higher ups in the network's hierarchy:

**Robert:** I think the teams are smart and they know where to go to get what they want...Even if you take it to the lower level of reporter versus boss...in this day and age, pro sports is driven - college too but, it's driven so much by the dollar...It's all about driving that machine to make every dollar you can and if at any point you think somebody's in your way in terms of image building or whatever, you're going to address that. And you know the way to get it done is to talk to people who control money in other organizations just like you control it in yours and they go right to the head and often will get results I believe.

Another objectivity issue revolves around what one participant referred to as “brother-in-lawing,” instances where reporters get too close to sources, both athletes and coaches. Participants were evenly divided on this issue. Many felt that friendships inevitably develop out of their relationships with players, coaches and other team personnel and did not view them as particularly problematic. Others complained about such a lack of propriety and the effect such friendships may have on a reporter’s ability to do his or her job in a manner that places the fan first:

**Robert:** I think in sports what happens is, many of us grow up and play sandlot football, baseball, basketball, whatever the case may be. High school maybe even a little college, and there’s something about sports that triggers this mechanism inside of us where we want to be like that. And many of us in this particular industry, I believe, have tended to look up at the athletes that we cover to some degree and that’s where I think the conflict comes into play. We want to be in the locker room with them. We want to be them and I think it’s caused some, that I’ve seen with my own eyes, to get too close to sources and it makes them, I believe, do the wrong thing at times. They begin to protect the source and are not as interested in the information that the public needs to hear.

**Meg:** You know, we have certain people that work for us, without naming names, who are a lot closer to the teams than others might be and you know, you can see because when they’re doing their stories, they’re gonna mention how many tickets are left and they want their parent company to succeed and they want to do stuff to make their bosses happy and as do I. I wouldn’t say that it’s hard for me to remain upbeat, to remain unbiased but, there are sort of subtle pressures sometimes from people above asking us to not necessarily remain unbiased, if that makes any sense. Cause you know it’s - we own [the company] owns the [basketball team] and the [hockey team]. And we have stakes in all of these guys.

Participants were very aware that the opportunities for conflicts of interest abound as well as of the importance of navigating them expertly. The repercussions for poorly handling such situations range from a simple reprimand to potentially losing one’s job.

*Finding 2: Respondents believe identity outside of the ideal (white and male) translates to improved access with sources, particularly athletes.*

Participants overwhelmingly viewed identity outside of being male and white as offering greater potential for access to sources, most notably athletes. The participants did not believe some reporters had privileges others did not, but rather that their identities better enable them to establish a rapport with sources that is becoming increasingly difficult to achieve in the present-day sports media environment. African-Americans and women were the identities most frequently identified as having these inherent benefits. Participants also discussed age dynamics as having considerable impact on the quality of individual reporter-source interactions.

## **Race**

Both Caucasian and African-American reporters believed that African-American reporters have an advantage regarding access to information sources, particularly in relating to African-American athletes. Participants inevitably viewed skin color as providing the ability to better relate to athletes:

**Robert:** I've had a couple of conversations with a few black athletes over the years where we've been able to talk about the race thing. They talk about it as to how it applies in their particular environment with their team and their frustrations with certain things and how they think they're viewed and race has come into play in their beliefs about how they're viewed differently and how they're treated differently. And I've related the same things to them about my particular industry and how I'm certain it plays a role and has played a role in the 23 plus years I've been in this particular industry. And so I'm sure that's a conversation that they could not have with somebody of another race, generally speaking.

**Norman:** [Don] gets a lot of information from a lot of the players because they're black and he's black. And, I don't know why, and this really doesn't bother me but obviously like, certain players relate to certain people....I'm not saying that Don gets more scoops than [a white reporter in the market] just because of his

color of skin. Absolutely no way. But, I think you'd be lying if you say that maybe some players can't relate to Don more than they can to a guy like [the white reporter].

**Don:** For a long time when I first broke into this business, it was mostly the all-white country club, okay. And very few of us were doing it so it was harder for us to get in and to break certain barriers. All of a sudden the playing surfaces changed to the point where more of the athletes, more of the prominent people in those positions now are of color. Absolutely it has helped me to cross certain barriers that you can't cross. And you know what, that's just a sign of the times and a change of the times and there's nothing wrong with that. I don't use it as a disadvantage....Do I use it as an advantage, absolutely.

However, both Caucasian and African-American reporters in this study were quick to qualify that while race may offer an initial advantage with a source, it cannot account for their ability to further these relationships:

**Don:** I can also say, you don't see [other African-American reporters in the market] getting what I get....because they didn't work it the way I work it. I didn't just work the color angle. As I said, I go back to the fact that I worked the history angle. I did my homework on the individual. It just so happens to be a black individual. So that's automatically one in you might have because it's not that many of us still in locker rooms. There's more now than ever before, but not as many. So you still have that in because they're gonna look at you and possibly sidle up to you a little bit quicker than he will with the majority of the white reporters that are in their locker room.

**Norman:** I think overall, a guy like Don befriends the players a little bit more. Maybe they, there's similar interests than somebody like me so yeah, maybe Don is gonna get a scoop from a [football player] before I will but I don't think that's a skin thing, a color thing. I think that's just, he can relate to the players more. He deals with the players more. He can have fun with the players more. He's gonna be, Don in postgame will be talking about their clothes. What reason do I have to go up to [that football player] and talk about what he's wearing that day?

In other words, participants felt that identity was much less consequential as far as the development of reporter-source relationships goes. Participants viewed racial identity as offering a reporter an initial "in" with a source but stated that the requisite rapport must be nurtured and cultivated beyond that which can only be done with the skills of a journalist.

While the advantages of being an African-American sports reporter appeared obvious to the vast majority of participants, the same could not be said for Caucasian sports reporters. Caucasian males did not see their racial identity as an advantage or a disadvantage regarding access to information sources:

**Gene:** Might it be easier for one particular person to develop a relationship with another particular person? Yeah it might be easier, it's not to say that I can't do it. So, I might have to work a little harder to get that relationship. But I think in the end, you can develop a relationship with any, if a player's open to having a relationship with a reporter, he may first look towards the good-looking female. And then he may second look toward someone who is just like him. But if he's open to it and you're a good person and you're a fair reporter and you ask intelligent questions and have dialogue I think eventually you can develop that relationship too. So, I don't think it puts you at a disadvantage. Short of, it might not be instant and I think maybe, in another scenario might be quicker to happen.

## **Gender**

Participants agreed that women also possess an inherent advantage in regard to accessing and establishing rapport with sources because of their gender. However, both men and women reporters enumerated several key disadvantages to being female that can affect their ability to relate to sources in the hyper-masculine domain of professional sports. The female participants, all Caucasian in this study, tended to treat the gender issues they encountered on the job simply as "the nature of the beast." In terms of advantages, they believed they possess a definite edge over male reporters in terms of garnering athletes' attention. Abigail, a 32-year-old reporter for the network, said this has become especially useful with the rise in the number of media crowding locker rooms:

When I ask a question, if I'm standing next to an older man that you know, maybe isn't in the best physical shape, they're gonna tend to answer my question first. And it's not I don't think a conscious effort, I don't think they look at the two of

us and say ‘I’m only gonna talk to her cause she’s cute.’ But it definitely, as I had one sportscaster tell me, you gotta use all the clubs in your bag.

Meg, a 25-year-old reporter who had been with the network for less than a year, attempted to describe the unique edge provided by her gender in reporter-source interactions:

I’ve had guys goof around with me and things like, it’s like a stupid flirty thing but when you’re there and you stand out like, I’m the one wearing a skirt I’m gonna stand out. Anything standing out that brings attention to you when you’re trying to get the players’ attention is a good thing. So, using that and then a lot of those guys are just you know, they’re 20-something-year-old guys so of course they’re gonna wanna talk to the girls. So being able to deflect like a silly, flirty, whatever into somebody answering a question, which I think I’ve been able to do, has been awesome. It’s hard to explain, exactly how you do it. It’s like one of those, it’s just like relating to another person. Men and women relate to each other differently than women and women relate to each other.

Abigail also acknowledged the sexual tension that enables her to establish rapport with male athlete sources but was quick to emphasize that the tenor of her interviews never becomes inappropriate:

I’ve definitely had people tell me, there’s some athletes in Philadelphia that are notoriously bad interviews. Just horribly like four-second sound bites where you just can’t, you couldn’t get two minutes out of them in a sit-down if you tried and one of them was [a well-known hockey player] last year when I did a sit down with him and it was easily a ten-minute interview. People are like, how did you get him to talk so much? I’m like, well he’s a 24-year-old maybe 25-year-old guy now. He and I go out to the same places, I see him out in the city, I’m a girl. So I mean, I definitely elicit different responses from different athletes because I’m a girl and that makes for a better interview. It’s not like we’re sitting there flirting and we’re gonna have drinks later. I have no intention, ever, of doing that.

Female reporters such as Abigail were purposefully cautious about appearing as though they are flirting with sources because they viewed it as a significant threat to their credibility. However, even if reporters such as 25-year-old Jennifer swear off flirting they must still deal with unwanted romantic or sexual advances from players:

They would kind of throw it out there to see if I would take the bait but you know, after they saw that I didn’t want any part of that then they just kind of pulled back

and stopped. And then, it's funny now because whenever I see that new person come into the locker room, I can see them doing the same thing.

Female reporters still perceived this type of activity as a serious threat to their credibility with other sources, as well as other media and colleagues in their workplace. Jennifer detailed how other media members began to credit her successes in developing relationships with players as sources to her dressing and acting inappropriately around athletes. According to Jennifer, the predominantly older, white, male reporters began to attempt to undermine her credibility as soon as they felt threatened by her progress in establishing working relationships with sources.

Participants identified athletes' perception of them as less intimidating and more compassionate than male journalists as another advantage. Lisa, a 43-year-old reporter who has been working in sports television for 15 years, explained that this is valuable because it allows her to more easily discuss subjects or topics generally very uncomfortable if not off-limits to her male counterparts:

There are certainly times where you can ask a question that may be a little more probing on a personal level with a man than a man can ask a man. There's just a comfort level there where women and men can engage in conversation than maybe two men wouldn't even think of engaging in because it would be uncomfortable. Like, why would you want to have that conversation when you're interviewing somebody? I think that's where your distinctive edge is.

Lisa also spoke about her willingness to approach sources such as the baseball team's pitching coach to ask for their help in order to better understand different facets of the game. This is another feature of a feminine approach to reporter-source relationships that differentiates Lisa from her male counterparts.

All of the participants in this study identified the most prominent disadvantage for women as their constant battle for respect and credibility. In addition to their status as

sexual objects in the locker room, female reporters also faced the prejudiced mindset that only men truly understand the intricacies of the athlete's sport. This is especially true for younger female reporters. Lisa, who has been with the network since it began operating in 1997, says women must endure what can be best described as a hazing or initiation period of indeterminate length:

They will see how much they can mess with you. And it doesn't really happen to me anymore because I've been there long enough and some of these guys could be my son at this point, sadly enough. I think that you have to be able to fit in, not like you bulldozed your way into the place and said, I deserve this, you owe this to me, I'm a woman, I deserve to be in here. If you go in with that attitude you're going to be hit with a lot of resistance. If you go in with the attitude that - hey I'm here can I play the game too and someone throws something out at you, a sarcastic remark, you need to be able to respond in such a way that doesn't tell them to fuck off. It's telling them how to go to hell and having them enjoy the trip. It's the art of doing something that way. You've got to be subtle yet firm if that makes sense.

These challenges to female reporters' attempts to obtain respect and credibility in the field illustrates how the professional sports locker room continues to pose significant obstacles for the female reporter.

## **Age**

The age of both reporter and source were frequently cited in regard to the impact they have on the interpersonal dynamic between reporter and source. Oftentimes, participants spoke of age as it related to their experience in the sports media. According to participants, age as an interpersonal dynamic works both ways because it informs both the source's perspective and actions as well as their own. The reporters noted that their own ability to deal with the pressures of the job, nurture relationships with sources and acquire new sources improves as their time in the sports media grows. According to Tom,



who has 12 years of field producing experience, a significant age differential between reporter and source presents problems for the newsgathering process:

If I have a reporter call out sick or somebody's kid is sick or somebody has a flood in their house and then I've gotta replace that reporter with sometimes an inexperienced producer, a kid who's 22—23 years old asking questions of let's say [a former basketball coach in the city]....That guy is in the hall of fame. 70 years old, and my guy is gonna say, 'hey, why did you full-court press in the second quarter?' [The hall of fame coach] is gonna laugh at him and bite his head off which he has done many, many times and part of that is age.

Jennifer, who had been working at the network for one year, described how her youth and inexperience factored into the interpersonal dynamic between herself and those she interacted with early on in her interview situations:

I wouldn't say I was in awe of the athletes or anything like that. But it was a very intimidating situation when I first got into it and the only way I got over that was I literally had to step outside of myself and kind of just pretend. You almost have to pretend you're someone else in that situation and go and you have to get your job done. And then after you do it a couple of times, then those feelings and those thoughts, they fly away. But, until then, at first, I really had to step out of my comfort zone and really be completely aggressive and in people's faces and because of that, they kind of respected me more.

In contrast, for those reporters who have a considerable amount of experience in a particular market or in the industry in general, the benefits regarding their ability to access information sources were very evident:

**Deb:** I think age, and also just having been around. Even though these players you know, they come and they go, they know that you've been here a long time... And I know, a couple of them have told me. They'll say, 'I'll do it if you're gonna do it' meaning one of our shows. If you're on it I'll do it. If you're not on, I'm not doing it. Yeah. Cause they trust you.

**Chris:** It definitely has changed over time, for me personally cause as you grow in a market, you become, your credibility increases when you're in a market and you're on the air all the time. So, I can pick up a phone with any general manager, any coach in the city and talk to them.

**Robert:** What helps that too is, in a local setting, I've been there for 20-plus years. So your tenure, in the case my tenure, kind of speaks to that. It's not like I just showed up a month ago or two months ago and they're wondering who this

guy is. Although when you have a new player in town who doesn't know, who has no sense of history of the city, you realize then that you're building relationship more than maintaining relationship and that can be a challenge if you want to get close to somebody and kind of understand who they are and to kind of learn things from them and stuff like that. But I think what helps quite honestly at this stage of the game for me is, I've been here a long time.

The other aspect of this dynamic is in relation to the source's age, especially athletes. Participants agreed that the youth of sources and the media inexperience that comes along with that has a considerable effect on the quality of the exchange as well as the relationship overall between reporter and source. Oftentimes younger athletes present a double-edged sword. While often more willing to offer their time for interviews, they are generally less media savvy in regard to their responses. Participants also noted that the transition from an athlete who is easy to access and interview to a more guarded and aloof one can take place during their rookie season. Several reporters stated young athletes who were initially very cooperative but whose attitudes changed in a very short period of time. Such a negative attitude toward the media, once developed for whatever reason, can take years to improve:

**Abigail:** It's not until I found, until a lot of the guys, til they kind of see their pro mortality come, that they kind of start to realize alright well one, I might wanna actually be doing what you're doing so I better start being nice to you and two, it's not worth it anymore. It's just not worth it to have that young and I think it's more when the guys are in their veteran years. When they're a couple years away maybe from retirement or their career being over that they finally - I don't know if they just give up or what but they just kind of give in. Stop fighting the fight.

**Jim:** I think that as players get older, they understand the relationship a little bit more....These guys that I say that are in their 30s understand and I think they know that, not to say that the media can be played but I think that the media, we're human like anybody else so you reach out or you're willing to establish a relationship, I don't think that the media will be as cutthroat. Not to say that the media is cutthroat but in some regards that they will have a softer side....The younger players don't really understand it, they don't know the role. They come up learning the media is out to get you, that they are the dark side.

Additionally, any combination of these identity characteristics only serves to compound the difficulty for a reporter in establishing the rapport necessary for a meaningful reporter-source relationship. For instance, Jennifer noted that as a new, young female reporter she automatically faced three quick strikes against her walking into the pro sports locker rooms. She was only able to break down some of these barriers with time and hard work; other relationships she continues to work on.

Management at the network is aware of the value of identity dynamics to the newsgathering process. Those who assign stories, such as Tom, admitted to taking identity into consideration when sending specific reporters out to cover certain stories:

There have been times where there are events that are largely African-American and if I have the option of sending, and it is my decision to send, a producer who is a white male versus a African-American male, I'll send the African-American guy. Because I just think that he would relate, maybe I'm wrong in this but I get the sense that he relates better you know. And honestly the results are better. Because if I do send, if the African-American person isn't in the office that day or is off or whatever and I send a white male, in a lot of cases, I don't get squat. When I send the African-American guy, I get much better results. I get more interviews, better sound bites and you know, more honest answers. Now, does it work vice versa? It's hard for me to say, you know, as a white male.

It is important to note that such identity considerations did not necessarily dominate the daily assignment decision-making process but were usually one of a number of factors used to determine reporter story assignments.

*Finding 3: Participants perceive technology as having a significant effect on their privileged position in the sports arena as well as on the work they are asked to perform in their role as reporter.*

Participants believe they are in the midst of a transition period, which is a product of technology revolutionizing the speed with which information is communicated to the sports-starved audience. Not only is technology diminishing their privileged position in the sports world but it is also impacting what is being asked of them in their role as reporter. While a sense of concern over keeping pace with these industry changes did emerge from a few of the participants, the majority appeared to be comfortable and confident about their ability to adapt to the evolving sports media environment. Participants discussed these issues and their views of them in detail, providing data that offers insight into the increasingly complex considerations involved in the work of the sports television reporter.

Perhaps the most important development in sports media newsgathering is that both sports franchises and players have been taking greater control over anything connected to their image and public perception of it. According to participants, the massive increase in the volume of sports media and the resulting potential for unwelcome negative publicity has driven teams and players alike to go to greater lengths than ever to protect their image as well as any information that could potentially harm it. Participants cited the creation and use of individual and team websites for the purpose of releasing self-serving information or to feature unique content as one growing example of the use of technology to achieve greater leverage with the media. Many teams now employ their own reporters who have access privileges that participants in this study cannot obtain although the coverage tends to be more promotional. These developments enable teams

to get their message out the way they want while also creating more potential competition for the sports fan's attention.

Participants said franchises and players have shown an increasing savvy in employing the Internet and its associated media in other ways as well. Blogs and so-called social media such as *Facebook* and *Twitter* are used as a way for teams and, even more prominently, players to connect directly to their fans. One participant described the role of social media as a player's own personal public relations staff. Athletes' personal websites serve a similar purpose with most conspicuously displaying the team's or athlete's charities and other information that places them in the most positive light possible. Not long ago franchises and athletes relied on media outlets to report such information. Now just who has the upper hand in the dissemination of sports information is at stake:

**Jennifer:** And a lot of times it's crazy because, he'll [the city's quarterback] write something on it [his blog] and everyone's talking about it: radio stations, newspapers, news, whatever. Everyone is talking about what he just wrote on his blog. No matter what it is. It could be the most, it could just be the most irrelevant thing and everyone is just like hung on every single word that he writes on that because it's him saying it and not someone else reporting that he's saying it.

**Chris:** It's where we're heading. They're all having their own websites. They have their information sent out. When you want something from Tiger Woods, you go to Tiger Woods' website and that's where people are reporting, Tiger Woods' website reported that he will play in this tournament. So they're controlling their information.

Despite the ramifications, the majority of participants didn't view this change as disturbing but rather something to be adapted to. Most understood the issue of teams and athletes increasing their control over information mainly as a reaction to the sometimes contentious atmosphere surrounding athletes' interactions with the media:

**Norman:** You always hear about athletes saying about being taken out of context. You may say a sentence you know, 'x, y, z but a, b, c' but then on the nightly

news you don't hear the 'although' part....So yeah, athletes are taken out of context. People are generally taken out of context plenty. If they put, if the athlete puts out his own message [out], what's there is there. There's a lot less room for interpretation.

**Abigail:** The thing that they don't like is that they're always on the defensive....I think that they really view themselves as that way. We're coming into their environment, their locker room and asking them questions. And they don't know what we're asking. But in that [their websites, tweets, etc.] they can put out their thoughts and what they want to do....They're basically giving a whole little mini press conference themselves and not take any questions unless they want to. You can write in a question, you can press like, a reply tweet or send a message on *Facebook* or whatever and they might answer it. But they're in control.

Other technologies such as texting offer considerable benefits to both reporter and information source. Gone are the days of communicating via the phone or even email, according to participants. Reporters in this study estimated their use of texting at 85 to 90% of their daily communication with sources:

**Abigail:** Having a phone call isn't always conducive. They might not be in a place where you can talk. I might not be in a place where I can talk. Sometimes I only need a one-word answer so instead of calling you up and bothering you which you might not be able to give me on the phone, you can just write back yes or no, is it true that so and so is being traded? Is it true that he's unhappy? Is it true there is a new deal in the works? Are you talking right now with the team? Things like that, they can just send you one-word replies. And I think for them they would they enjoy that because one, it doesn't take much time to get the message out there and they don't have to fool with talking to you.

**Jennifer:** It's made it way easier. Because when I first started here, I was primarily calling people and it felt like a lot of times I just kept hitting walls. And people weren't getting back to me. But as soon as I started texting people, I'd immediately get an answer back. Which is funny because I'd be like, 'I just called you, how are you available by text?' But, it's funny because people are way more apt to respond through texting than they are to call you.

**Don:** Nobody wants to talk on the phone anymore. It's amazing....I just think athletes in general just hate talking on the phone. There's so many people hitting them up for tickets and everything else and family members that they ignore phone calls now. So they weed out who they want to talk to and who they don't want to talk to by way of texting.

However, players and teams are also adept at using texting to their advantage when necessary. Jennifer described a common occurrence she is confronted with in her dual role of reporter and the booking producer who secures guests for shows on the network:

Say they had an awful, terrible game on Sunday, then I'd get a text message the next afternoon from a random person in the PR department, maybe even an intern, saying that so-and-so couldn't do it. And then I'd call the person and like, nothing. They wouldn't answer or anything. And I wouldn't be able to see them until Wednesday in the locker room and they would just like laugh it off. But for me, that puts me in an awful spot and that's like the team, by that guy texting me, they kind of like, okay it and they kind of baby their guys a lot and let them have the easy way out.

In addition to losing control of their role as information gatekeepers and seeing their privileged position in sports undergo a dramatic shift, these reporters are also dealing with several key transformations in terms of what it means to be a sports television reporter at a regional sports network. Regional sports channels such as the one in this study first arrived on the scene in the mid to late 1990s when it was largely a print-dominated sports media market. While these channels left an indelible mark on the sports media landscape, the explosion of sports content on the Internet and sports talk radio is once again dramatically altering the contemporary sports media environment. All of the participants are keenly aware that the speed with which new information travels no longer favors television. This transformation in the sports media has forced the regional sports channel in this study to invest more resources in its website. The channel's website has grown into an entity the parent company views as increasingly crucial to its success. Such a change has left some in the newsroom uneasy about the future:

**Meg:** I know it scares the hell out of a lot of TV people. A lot of the guys like the on-air guys at [this regional sports channel], want to have as much to do with us [the website staff] as possible. I've been approached by like, [on-air colleague] who was like, '[Meg] I just want to let you know, I want to do stuff for the

website.’ Cause these guys recognize that it’s sort of like this scary, other thing. [An on-air colleague] has said stuff to me, ‘I really want to make sure that I’m doing stuff for the website.’ Cause they know that that’s where the future is. It really does, it scares the crap out of a lot of them, I think.

Participants did not view all of the changes taking place in the sports media environment as bad. For some the benefits were as simple as using the Internet to research and identify nuggets of information useful for breaking the ice with sources. Others viewed a lot of the content on the Internet including message boards or fan forums as great places for story ideas or to get an idea of what fans are talking about. Others looked at information found on athletes’ websites, blogs or *Twitter* pages as a way to get other sources to open up in interviews or to respond to another person’s comments. However, the need to adapt to new technologies has had a profound impact on their work, especially considering the role the Internet now plays in the sports media:

**Abigail:** People want to know everything. And so, there’s this whole new industry of this media where you’re just online. You don’t even do anything, all you do is you just write a blog or you manage a website. I know people where that is what their job is now.....the fans need to find out everything there is to know. I don’t know where it started from but as soon as people started giving credence to like a [website] profootballtalk(.com) then that really grew from there cause people are like, oh they’re actually right and then ESPN picks up on it and the national media picks up on it. And when you’re seeing people on Fox Sports and they’re quoting things like this or they’re backing up the stories that are printed on there that only feeds more. There’s more bloggers because they see that there is a market now. I think simple supply and demand.

One of the biggest adjustments has been an increase in the degree of difficulty of doing their jobs on a daily basis:

**Don:** It has changed my job in a sense that, now I have to check stories more thoroughly and quicker in a lot of cases, especially with blogging. You have 100 bloggers out there for any given day, you may have one or two who are really close to being accurate in what they do. Especially when it comes around time of free agency or draft and things like that, you hear all these rumors out there so you gotta start checking a little bit more than you did. Normally you just rely on an individual source or sources within the structure of that entity that you’re



dealing with to give you information. But now every time something happens, if it's somebody getting hurt, somebody about to get traded, you gotta check it out....most of what you hear is just rumors. But you have to check it cause you don't want to get caught with your guard down. So it does make you speed up your game a little bit daily in terms of making sure you're on top of things.

**Larry:** Used to be a lot easier for me when I was just covering the team for the [one of the city's newspapers], all I used to have to worry about is, I'd pick up the [paper] in the morning, I'd see what the other guy wrote. That was all I really had to pay attention to. Okay, that's what he wrote today, fine, he didn't beat me on anything. Okay I won't write that today I'll write something else. That was all I really had to pay attention to, was what the other newspapers in the city were saying. There was no talk radio, televisions and TV sports was really just about reading scores. There was no real reporting there. It was a much smaller and manageable kind of universe you were working in and competing in. Now it's just relentless, it never stops.

Tom detailed the ways in which he believes the Internet is changing the network's approach to their coverage and content. He identified the areas where the Internet's influence was most obvious as in the style of writing and the decisions they make, namely that he feels forced to take more risks. Tom, a field producer as well as the station's assistant news director, gave a specific example of an Internet-driven story involving a fight allegedly started by young city sports fans that proved to be a decision-making dilemma:

The Internet can begin to take eyeballs away from me when they're willing to take risks like that, that I can't take. Cause they're not saying it's news. They're just saying somebody sent me this video, watch it if you want and oh by the way, they're also saying that it started a fight. So that's what's changing to me. And you know, the other part is what stories they'll cover, you know. Do I ever cover [former city baseball player], as an example, who is an infamous playboy in town? Do I cover him out and about and what girl he was hanging out with and who he picked up at this bar and that bar? I don't but somebody spots him rolling out of a club at two in the morning and takes a picture with their camera phone and sends it to an individual blog site, it's the lead story on that blog site. And you know what, I'm reading it. You know? And how do I know that a single word of this supposed witness, what they're telling me is the truth....there's no way to know but the fact is, it's more entertaining than - that's what I'm afraid of. So it's sort of a TMZ approach in a lot of ways but in sports, we haven't really gone

there and I don't want to go there but I'm afraid. I am afraid that that might happen.

Other participants, such as Deb, who covers the city's basketball team, echoed the same sentiment when discussing the challenge of capturing what fans want in this quickly evolving media environment:

**Deb:** So you know, when we pretend this magazine show that we - had impact. They don't put time and money or research into it. They think everything has to be quick, sound bite, inside information. What [a basketball player] had for lunch. Like I put that up the other day cause he and I happened to order the same thing and he was at one end and I was at the other. I never cared, I'd much rather show those race horses that were left to die when they couldn't win the races anymore and how they were saved by these people, you know. But it's not what people want anymore....So I realized, people like story telling, I don't need every quote after practice, they like stories. That's what they like. And I think you get away from it because you want to do what the other guy's doing so that you don't miss out on something. It's like, forget it. I think they like stories and they like to know numbers that you don't just see everywhere.

The regional sports network in this study has a small staff of reporters whose job it is to write solely for the website. In some instances, the network has hired well-known print reporters in the market such as Larry to cover beats they have traditionally covered and bolster the website's credibility. Those who have traditionally been solely television reporters may record video segments that run on the network's website while others have had to transition into a sort of dual television/Internet reporter role. Deb is one of these dual television/Internet reporters and a classic example of someone being asked to do more work with the same resources she had when she operated as solely a television reporter:

At the game the other night. I went to [the] shoot-around, wrote that blog, put something together for the news, did post game for news and wrote a post game story for the web. That's a lot, and you think I have time to go look at *Twitter* accounts? That's why I'm saying like I need people to be looking out for me so, some of your friends, if they see something, will send you an email or whatever

say, ‘you might want to check this out’ or whatever. You need other people’s eyes.

Reporters are also being asked to establish a greater presence online through the use of social media, yet another drain on their time. The station’s management strongly encourages the use of such social media as *Twitter* and *Facebook* in order for reporters to promote themselves and the station’s programming. This has become a source of consternation for some reporters:

**Jim:** I have to now involve myself in online communication. I have to have a *Twitter* account and if I hear something or I know something, I post it on *Twitter* and if you want more, catch it on [one of the station’s shows] or catch it on television. So you almost use those aspects to tease what you have on your television program or give them the information first so that way they know you’re a little bit ahead of the game. It’s almost like embedding it in the minds of the sports fan that I’m the source to go if you’re looking for information on that particular team.

**Deb:** I even said to myself last night, I thought that the way I did my job, the way I presented information, my knowledge, fair, being trustworthy, I thought that’s what doing my job, is most important. It’s not, it’s not. And nowadays it’s all about self-promotion, even for me. And that’s sad.

Tom, the assistant news director at this regional sports channel, questioned the station’s current use of social media:

[Who] allows their reporter to post something on *Twitter* before they post it on their own site? It just befuddles me. I mean, why would you give away the farm? For the life of me, the news is the farm. The news is...the content is the driving force behind everything. Why would you possibly allow that to be put on a social media sight before you put it on your own website? It makes zero sense to me at all. And I’m dealing with it too cause you know, our news director is telling our reporters to get stuff up on *Twitter*. I think it’s ridiculous. I think you should be posting, we have news about so and so, here’s the link to [our website]. So you know. I think it’s kind of crazy. But, it is pushing us, it’s changing us.

## **Conclusion**

The excerpted interviews above and my observation data reveal the complexity of their jobs and the position participants saw themselves as occupying in relation to their information sources in the sports world. Sports television reporters at this regional sports network perceived their role as evolving in relationship to information sources, the fans and the ownership of their network as well as the sports franchises they cover. Their increasingly impersonal and strained relationship with athletes and teams is making their job more difficult and also impacts the quality of their work. In response, they have been turning to alternative information sources to supplement their coverage. Beat reporters appear to be best positioned to deal with the contemporary sports media environment. The continuing deterioration of the reporter's relationship with athletes and teams is problematic because of the need for access to these sports stars, which is high atop the fans' expectations of their programming. The participants in this study see themselves as fans, albeit privileged ones who are responsible for representing the audience's sporting interests while trusting their own judgment regarding what fans want. The increasing prevalence of airing rumor and gossip as well as the need to delve into players' personal lives only serves to compound the fraying of the reporter-source relationship. Finally, reporters find themselves confronted with more conflicts of interest than ever in their dealings with the ownership of sports franchises as well as their own parent company. The challenges to objectivity in the world of sports television are growing increasingly complicated: conflicts of interest between their ownership and the teams they cover, those with status using their clout to achieve their goals, the threat of sanctions, and reporters befriending sources are all issues that must be considered on a regular basis.

The reporters in this study viewed identity outside of being white and male as translating into an improved capability to access sources and use their identity as an “in” to establish the rapport that is becoming increasingly crucial to building fruitful relationships with information sources. This is significant because of the growing difficulty of gaining this type of access to sources in this media environment. Participants perceived African-American and female reporters as having distinct advantages in the contemporary sports landscape; however, participants also believe women face various disadvantages. Age is also an important dynamic in terms of the quality of reporter interactions with sources. Older, more experienced reporters have significantly more credibility than their younger counterparts. Management understands the advantages of these dynamics well and often uses identity to its advantage in its assignment of stories.

New media are increasingly becoming a contested site in the reporter-source relationship. As franchises and players become more technologically savvy, the struggle to adapt to and take advantage of technology to its fullest becomes much more complicated for the sports media. Technology enables the sources of the sports world to better control information that affects them. This is quickly becoming a crucial aspect of the new frontier of the sports media. Furthermore, technology is also dramatically changing what is being asked of television sports reporters. Their work has become more difficult in several ways including the imperative to adapt to the changes wrought by technology, trying to remain relevant and interesting in terms of the content they produce, the need to sift through more information to perform their job appropriately, the obligation to do more work with the same amount of time and resources, and the requirement to practice self-promotion, mainly through the use of social media.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Analysis and Interpretation of Findings**

The purpose of this research was to explore the work of reporters in the contemporary sports-media complex with a goal of better understanding the factors that inform and complicate the reporter-source relationship and the sports television reporter's work in general. Both play a crucial role in providing insight into the newsgathering process as well as the sports television industry in the digital age. This study used ethnographic techniques to collect qualitative data via participant observation and long interviews. Participants in the project included 14 reporters and field producers at a regional sports channel in a major East Coast television market. The study was based on the following three research questions:

1. What factors complicate the reporter-source relationship in sports?
2. What role does social identity play in individual reporter-source interactions?
3. How is the medium of sports television dealing with the factors complicating the reporter-source relationship and the resulting changes taking place in the sports-media complex?

While the findings directly correlate to each research question, the interpretations detailed below do not specifically align to a particular finding because of their frequently interconnected nature. This chapter analyzes and interprets the findings and is organized by three major interpretations:

1. Participants must negotiate and perform with fragmented professional identities in their day-to-day work in sports television.

2. The destabilization of hierarchies in the sports-media complex is forcing participants to quickly adapt to new technologies, convergence and corporate flexibility.
3. The institutional pressure applied by corporate ownership has forged a powerful influence on the daily work routines and decision-making of participants.

The analysis phase is the result of my ability to identify themes within the categories derived from the data – as well as the connection of themes that emerged among the categories. Interpretations are the product of viewing these themes against issues raised in the pertinent literature. The guiding principles used in this analysis were (1) connections among the experiences of the participants; (2) the ways in which participants comprehend and explain these experiences; (3) unanticipated and anticipated relationships and connections; (4) agreement or disagreement with the literature and my prior professional experience; and (5) the ways in which the data go beyond the scope of the literature (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008).

*Interpretation 1: Participants must negotiate and perform with fragmented professional identities in their day-to-day work in sports television.*

The complications that inform the work of reporters and field producers at this regional sports channel on a daily basis, including their relationship with sources, can be largely explained through their need to negotiate multiple identities – gender, racial, age, professional and organizational – for this particular media organization. This is especially true for reporters. It is important to note that the argument here is not that every participant assumes every identity but that a majority of the participants found themselves

grappling with any number of these multiple identities on a regular basis. The most salient of these multiple potential identities is the individual's gender or race (or ethnicity). Previous research has discussed the conflicts that arise when female identity is pitted against the masculine values that characterize the journalism and sports journalism fields and the result is a fragmented professional identity (Thiel, 2004; Hardin & Shain, 2006). Others have examined racial identity in the newsroom and how easily it is absorbed by the dominance of whiteness (Rodgers & Thorson, 2003; Pritchard & Stonbely, 2007). Oftentimes these identities conflict, creating a constant struggle for women and minorities as they attempt to negotiate their fragmented professional identity and its performance. While this study identified some of these same conflicts for women and African Americans in the realm of television sports journalism, it also expands the notion of fragmented identity to include men in the discussion.

It must be stated that the diversity of the newsroom in this study is above average. Of the 10 reporters/anchors at the station, four are Caucasian men, three are African American men, and three are Caucasian women (a fourth Caucasian woman participant also contributes on-camera reports for the station although she is not officially titled as an anchor/reporter at the station). No Asian Americans, Latino/Hispanic Americans or Native Americans hold on-camera positions. In addition to the on-camera personnel, the sports director is also female. Nevertheless, while a newsroom may be organizationally diverse, female and minority social identities may still conflict with the hegemonic masculinity of sports and sports journalism.

In the hyper-masculine environment of sports, gender is the most prominent social identity. The women sports reporters in this study faced conflicts pitting their gender



identities against the masculine values of sports and/or sports journalism. This tension was most evident in discussions concerning their relationships with sources. Female participants did not hesitate to “use their gender strategically” in order to aid their interactions with male sports sources (Robinson, 2005, p. 187). In some cases, they described such uses of gender as an almost indescribably natural part of being female. The women in this study employed both of Lachover’s (2005) typologies: the “flirting” and “help me” tactics. The use of the “help me” tactic could be found among female participants such as when 43-year-old Lisa asked the pitching coach of the city’s professional baseball team to help her better understand the intricacies of major league pitching. The younger women I interviewed, such as 25-year-old Meg, seemed to flirt more often than those women with longer sports reporting tenures. Flirting can be viewed as a potential tactic employed by female sports reporters as an alternative to the male bonding that male sports reporters are able to engage in with athletes and coaches. Women are not privy to membership in sports journalism’s boys network and thus the option to establish rapport by becoming pals or buddies with male sources. The tendency for male sports reporters to befriend athletes and coaches was referred to by one reporter as “brother-in-lawing” and was specifically frowned upon by several participants. Flirting, viewed as a rapport-building tactic, can then be seen as an illustration of the resourcefulness of female sports reporters who are often unable to partake of the tactics that have proven valuable to men for decades.

However, female participants such as Abigail were wary about creating sexual tension with athletes or other sources, especially when around fellow journalists, because of their worry over being perceived as acting inappropriately. This concern over their

credibility appeared to be an especially burdensome one. Abigail particularly emphasized that she would never act on the tension and enter into a romantic relationship with an athlete. Jennifer dealt with other journalists questioning the appropriateness of her outfits in the locker room when they observed the ease with which she was able to build relationships with members of the city's professional football team. The younger female participants were especially sensitive to any situation that could potentially taint their status as bona fide, qualified journalists.

Moreover, several younger female participants acknowledged their attractiveness insofar as it pertained to their ability to access otherwise hard-to-approach athletes and other information sources and their ability to do their jobs in general. For these participants, a certain self-consciousness and insecurity over the role their attractiveness plays in their careers was evident. This may be more pronounced in television sports journalism than print sports journalism because of its emphasis on physical appearance. Once again, their concern centered on their credibility. These participants were very aware of the "double standard" described by Sheffer and Schultz (2007). They were determined to prove they were good at their jobs and not simply hired because of their looks. The burden for young female sports reporters in television sports journalism to prove they're not just a pretty face appeared to be considerable among this population.

The end result for female sports reporters in the situations described above is a struggle over the legitimacy of using their sexuality for professional gain. The female sports reporters in this study took advantage of male stereotyping of them as either sex objects or weak, insofar as their experience or knowledge of sport is concerned. This allowed female participants to access and establish rapport with athletes, coaches and

other information sources in ways that may often give them an advantage over their male counterparts in this specific area of sports journalism. However, this may be difficult for female sports reporters to reconcile. Many female journalists may be emotionally conflicted over using their sexuality in this way for any number of reasons. The participants in this study appeared to be most conflicted over the possible perception of them as acting inappropriately with sources and the resulting loss of credibility that comes with that, despite the fact that male sports reporters befriend athletes, coaches and other sources on a regular basis. Moreover, female sports reporters also run the risk of losing credibility based merely on the perception of them as making up for what they lack in skill with physical attractiveness. Such a scenario presents a no-win situation. Women must constantly work to prove themselves in sports journalism's culture of hegemonic masculinity, which often involves – to paraphrase Abigail – using all the clubs in their bag. However, by employing such tactics they also run the risk of gaining a reputation for being more beauty than legitimate reporter. This demonstrates another conflict between the feminine sensibilities of the female sports reporters in this study and the masculine culture of the sports journalism profession. As Lachover (2005) also concluded, the use of sexuality for professional gain does not lead to true social change for women but can be successful in terms of achieving professional goals.

All of the participants in this study perceived women as having a distinct advantage because of their gender in certain situations, such as the ability to gain access to male sources, particularly athletes, in the locker room or to get male interviewees to open up in ways a man never could. This mindset further illustrates the role of privilege for white men in television sports journalism. As long as white men are considered the

norm, their gender and race will continue to be transparent. In this case, the transparency of the white male sports reporter results in a perceived disadvantage for white male sports reporters regarding their access to information sources; meanwhile, a snapshot of the media in any professional sports locker room will inevitably be dominated by white male reporters asking questions of the most prominent athletes and coaches. Moreover, women and racial minorities are perceived to hold some advantages in an industry that undoubtedly favors white men at every turn (Hardin et al., 2009). Such attitudes can be quite harmful. Other research has shown that white men in sports broadcasting are less likely to believe women and minorities faced discrimination in the field. Meanwhile, women and racial minorities may view their social identity as the reason they were hired (Hardin et al.).

Female participants did discuss the downside of their ability to stand out in the locker room and the sports world in general. Most acknowledged how uncomfortable the locker room is for them – the smell, the naked men and the fact that they are constantly bombarded with unwanted sexual advances. Harassment continues to run rampant and often presents female sports reporters with a distressing work environment. However, participants did not complain about such difficulties; rather, they viewed them as “the nature of the beast.” This attitude does not challenge the existing structure and is tinged with neoliberalism – that the institutional structure of sports and sports journalism has no bearing on their situation and welfare. In essence, this merely serves to maintain the values and culture that pervade sports and sports journalism. Lisa, a 15-year veteran of sports television, especially noted the importance of fitting in to achieving success in the field although she did attempt to do it in her own feminine way. Regardless, it is

illustrative of the pressure on female sports reporters to adapt to the hegemonic masculinity of the sports-media complex, which can be oppressive.

It deserves mention that while noting some of the advantages of being a woman in the sports media, the overwhelming majority of participants did acknowledge women as facing substantial challenges in their work including persistent sexual harassment and a constant questioning of their credibility. Perhaps this is a sign that some progress is being made toward an improved understanding and sympathy for the trials and tribulations women undergo in the sports journalism profession. The diversity of the newsroom in this study may play a role in the more progressive attitude toward the difficulties women face.

This study's participants did not include young African American men or any female minorities; however, evidence of the perception of the role of racial identity in the cultivation of sources, mainly athletes, was clear. Both white and black participants believed race often allowed African American reporters to more quickly establish a rapport with athletes of color. According to participants, this is no small consideration because of the number of African American athletes populating the professional sports leagues they cover. Once again, this mentality reveals the power that privilege has in conferring disadvantaged status to those who are actually privileged because of their social identity, white men.

Participants stated that this advantage did not automatically translate into a meaningful relationship with those same sources. In other words, while race may offer opportunities for African Americans to initially access or establish rapport with athletes or coaches of color, the ability to further cultivate and maintain those relationships

requires more than minority status, namely the skills of a journalist. African American participants stressed this point, which may be a product of their being particularly conscious of attempts to undermine their credibility as reporters.

Another facet of the race dynamic in the sports media is “stacking,” or assigning blacks to what are deemed race-appropriate stories (Rowe, 1999). At least one manager in this study acknowledged that he assigns African American reporters when the story involves the need to interview fellow African Americans. He attributed this to the results, namely that African American reporters come back with better material than a white reporter might. Scholars in Europe have noted how this method of assigning stories may negatively impact minorities and thus their career advancement opportunities. Considering the preeminence of professional football and the large number of blacks playing professional football, this would not appear to be a concern here in the United States. It is worth noting that the beat reporters at the station in this study included an African American male on the city’s pro football beat, females covering professional baseball and basketball, and the lone white male beat reporter covering hockey.

Further evidence of racial identity playing a significant role was not found in the research. This may be the product of a dearth of minority participants, a sign that participants were unconscious of racial dynamics in the newsroom or perhaps that some racial progress is being made in this media organization. Considering the number of African American professional athletes, it is disappointing that African American sports reporters are not better represented in the industry. However, it bears repeating that African Americans comprise three of the 10 reporters/anchors at the regional sports channel in this study. The degree of influence of race in a sports reporter’s day-to-work –

including their relationships with athletes and other information sources – is an area ripe for further research. One suggestion is to compare the minority populations in particular sports to their representation among beat reporters for that particular sport.

The potential effect of age identity on a reporter's relationship with sources and his or her work overall warrants discussion and also provides potential directions for future research. As a social identity, age was evident in terms of participants' self-concept as either young or more mature. Not surprisingly, participants attached more value to being grouped with older and thus, generally speaking, more established journalists. Participants recognized that credibility is a crucial component of journalistic authority and that it is often directly connected to age as opposed to one's work or performance. Conversely, youthfulness includes group membership that has substantially less value to a reporter's work and professional status because sources and colleagues alike essentially question a young journalist's credibility almost automatically. Considering the importance of credibility to one's professional standing, age identity for young reporters can be seen as coming into conflict with their professional identification with traditional journalistic ideals.

Identification as either a youthful or more mature reporter appeared to carry considerable emotional significance for participants. For those younger participants who saw their youth as conspicuous in the reporter-source setting, there was noticeable insecurity about how it affected their ability to establish credibility and rapport with sources. Several participants related stories about veteran players and coaches who took advantage of younger reporters or had fun at their expense. This activity served to heighten the tension for young participants as they attempted to overcome these and other

obstacles to doing their jobs adequately. Conversely, older participants reported that the benefits associated with being more experienced journalists were plentiful. They specifically described a certain confidence that their age identity provided them when interacting with sources, especially those in upper management, and doing their jobs in general. The comfort level of older participants in their professional standing stood in stark contrast to younger participants. The negative values and emotions experienced by young participants may place considerable stress on them in terms of their perception of their professional identity as well as their standing within the organization.

It appears that it can be difficult to separate age identity from an individual's other identities. For instance, Jennifer was self-conscious about her gender, youth and inexperience when first interacting with professional athletes in the locker room and she considered each of these identities as disadvantageous based on her experiences. She added that it was the combination of these identities that was most daunting to her in terms of her ability to do her job satisfactorily. While age may not be as salient as gender or race, it could potentially act as the most prominent identity characteristic in a given setting or interaction; however, it appears to be more appropriate to view age identity in combination with other identities. This is where research into age as a social identity may provide the most useful insight into the dynamics of a reporter's work and interactions – age identity, its effect when combined with other identities such as gender or race, and the resulting impact on interpersonal and intergroup journalistic relationships.

Social identities may be the most outstanding identities that participants possess, but they are not the only identities they assume in their work as sports television reporters. Participants in this study also identified themselves as journalists and



conscientiously attempted to apply and abide by the ideals traditionally associated with the profession of journalism. Participants spoke of their desire to present both sides of the story for viewers, to be a representative for the fan and their interests, to practice fairness in their interactions with sources, to avoid the danger of getting too close to sources, and to deal carefully with matters of rumor and gossip in addition to numerous other traditional journalism values.

Sports reporters then may identify powerfully with the identity of journalist. Many journalists identify themselves more easily with the profession of journalism than, for example, with the medium they work in or the media outlet that employs them (Russo, 1998). Some participants obviously identified more strongly with the professional identity of journalist than others. Professional identity also often takes precedence over a reporter's gender or racial identity (Mazingo, 1989; Rodgers & Thorson, 2003; Claringhould et al., 2004; Kian & Hardin, 2009). Of course, professional identity is not without its pitfalls and challenges. Information sources may view reporters first and foremost as journalists or, more generically and negatively, as a member of "the media." Jim, the 39-year-old hockey beat reporter in this study, specifically bemoaned the tendency for athletes to lump all of the media together because of its often deleterious effect on his relationships with athletes and his work in general.

The journalistic integrity, and thus the professional identity, of participants in this study was tested in a variety of ways. First and foremost, any natural inclination of participants to consider themselves journalists may often be undermined by the conflicts inherent in the unique makeup of sports television content and coverage. The need for entertainment or drama in sports television production oftentimes wins out over the pull

of journalism. Decisions regarding how much journalism versus (light) entertainment or drama to include in a given story or production are made via the easy to invoke but difficult to define notion of a journalist's "judgment." Furthermore, the imperative that sports coverage be "entertaining above all else" is a documented one (Lowes, 2000, p. 100). The assistant sports director at the station in this study invoked this exact sentiment, the need to be entertaining, when discussing the mindset that ultimately dictated their coverage and content. The addition of a "Truth and Rumors" page to the channel's website is just one example of this approach. In short, participants in this study also wore the hat of entertainer or dramatist in their everyday work. Interestingly, scholars have begun to remark on the increasingly entertainment-oriented content of hard news journalism (Thussu, 2009). Perhaps sports journalism and hard news journalism are becoming more similar than ever before.

The professional identity conflict here is a product of the requirement for entertainment or drama in sports television production, which directly affects the reporter's credibility as a journalist. It is this entertainment element that contributes to sports journalism being dubbed the "toy department." The criticism directed at sports television is much more blunt, with some charging that it has mutated into television entertainment because of its preoccupation with the entertainment aspect (Boyle, 2006a). Some of this criticism comes from print sports journalists who look down upon those in sports television. Several participants in this study specifically noted the rift between print and television reporters, which essentially involves newspaper reporters questioning the journalistic integrity of reporters from other media including television. Such rifts may also contribute to the insecurity of one's professional identity.

Participants' also openly revealed their identification as fans, which is a second conflict with their professional identities. Participants went beyond feeling a certain duty in their work as a representative for the fan and also considered themselves fans. Such an approach to their jobs does not meet traditional standards of journalism, namely the revered value of objectivity. According to some, there are benefits to being identified as a fan – it helps to ingratiate them to their audience. Some participants were convinced being a fan was necessary to do their jobs well. This mindset may be a form of rationalization; however, it was stressed that being a fan did not equate to the notion of boosterism. Reporters understood well the danger of coming off as too uncritical at the appropriate time, especially in a sports market renowned for its criticism of its athletes, teams and management such as the one in this study. In this way they may have adapted to the unique definition of a fan particular to the sports market they work in. Regardless, the fan identity of reporters creates more tension with their professional identity and any desire to be viewed as journalists.

A third conflict with participants' professional identities is the celebrity culture that characterizes contemporary society and the sports-media complex and participants' expanding roles in it. In addition to covering, creating and promoting sporting celebrities, in many instances reporters are also celebrities themselves. This is certainly true of the reporter participants in this study, who are at the very least regional celebrities because of their status as television sports reporters. They sign autographs, pose for pictures with fans and have thousands of “followers” and “friends” on social media websites. The reporters in this study have been told to practice self-promotion on websites such as *Twitter* and *Facebook* by their media organization's management. These so-called social

media are generally used to “tease” or promote an element of an upcoming story or show on the station or its website if not the work of the individual reporter. Some enjoy this new element of their jobs while others have resisted it in part because it contributes to their already considerable job responsibilities.

The tension created by this identification as celebrity is twofold. First of all, celebrity journalists are anathema to traditional journalism values – the reporter or news presenter should not be bigger than the news he or she delivers – although we see them more frequently in today’s media than ever before. Second, self-promotion raises identity issues for these reporters who are already being pulled in several directions. As Wernick points out, “If social survival, let alone competitive success, depends on continual, audience-oriented, self-staging, what are we behind the mask? If the answer points to a second identity (a puppeteer?) how are we to negotiate the split sense of self this implies?” (Wernick, 1991, p. 193). Some participants were more comfortable with this new imperative for self-promotion, while others appeared to be struggling with adapting to this latest tension on their professional identity. It is possible that participants have already become comfortable negotiating the tension between the roles of entertainer and fan with their professional identities but for some of these participants the addition of a celebrity/self-promotional identity has increased the stress on their ability to negotiate their fragmented professional identities.

Participants’ professional identities also conflicted with their identification with the media organization they work for, or their identity as employee. While some may identify strongly as a journalist, others may adopt the mindset and cultural norms of their employer/parent company. The ownership situation of the regional sports channel in this

study, detailed earlier, presents an increased opportunity for identification with the parent company and its interests. As several participants explained, the bias is readily discernible in some reporter's work. These employees placed the company's success and pleasing their managers at the top of their priority list. Identifying with the parent company and its interests may be a valuable method for achieving one's professional goals; however, such an approach to one's work also runs the risk of undermining their journalistic credibility. In this identity conflict, reporters faced difficult choices that pit their journalistic integrity against the well-being of the company that signs their paychecks. It should not be surprising when, in our daunting media environment and world economy, identification with the reporter's organization wins out – call it the political economy of professional identity. Furthermore, when one considers the current media environment, world economy and the ever-growing strength of the corporation, employee identification may be on the rise for the foreseeable future.

The findings also seem to demonstrate that the corporation has succeeded, at least with some employees of this sports television station, in shifting a mentality stressing the importance of enterprise onto the employee. As Deuze (2007) has observed, enterprise can become a part of the professional identity of workers no matter their employment status with the company. Storey and colleagues (2005) see this shift as a conscious effort by corporate managers to use professional identity as a form of organizational control, suggesting that the goal is to “reconstitute workers as more adaptable, flexible, and willing to move between activities and assignments and to take responsibility for their own actions and their successes and failures” (p. 1035-36). Some resisted socialization into the culture of the media organization's newsroom more easily than others. Future

researchers would be wise to examine the complexity of this dynamic in greater detail. The efforts of this sports television channel to adapt to the evolving sports-media complex are creating additional challenges and pressures for participants in this study, which will be discussed in greater detail in Interpretations 2 and 3.

The media organization in this study may be contributing to this identity conflict with its hiring practices. One participant who makes newsroom personnel hiring decisions stated that he would hire a “sports junkie” over a “television junkie” because he can teach them the television side of their job responsibilities but could not instill in them a passion for sports. Such hiring practices may serve to create a fan culture, which would be in perpetual conflict with the ideal of objectivity and the journalism profession. Viewed this way, one is forced to question this sports media organization’s sense of obligation to traditional journalism values. Such a situation would create incessant tension for those who identify first and foremost with a professional sports journalist identity.

As Hall (1990) has suggested, participants seem to be shifting identities constantly in their day-to-day work as sports television newsgatherers. However, the majority of participants also seemed able to shift between these identities seamlessly with minimal distress or self-consciousness about the tensions inherent to these identity conflicts. Participants complained about the need to incorporate self-promotion into their daily routines more than any other issue. Interestingly, this was also the newest identity that they have had to negotiate in their jobs. Perhaps the reporters at this station, while yearning for professional status, are able to deal with having their journalistic integrity questioned because they have mastered the negotiation of conflicting identities such as

entertainer, fan and employee. These sports reporters may be achieving this by embracing the hybrid nature of sports television production and everything it entails as a rationale for handling the tensions inherent to their work the way they choose to. In essence, participants see themselves as journalists when they need to be, entertainers when they need to be, fans when they need to be and so forth. Many may have adopted this rationale or approach so fully that they reveal little self-consciousness over how it conflicts with the ideals of the journalism profession. This may help to explain previous research that shows sports journalists believe they should operate with different ethical norms (Hardin, Zhong & Whiteside, 2009).

Scholarship examining identity has mainly focused on the tension between two conflicting identities; however, participants in this study often face a much more complex identity negotiation. Giddens' (1991) notion of self-identity may offer useful insight into the fragmented professional identity of the participants in this study. For Giddens, identity is a distinctively modern project, the process through which individuals are able to reflexively create a personal narrative for themselves. This is crucial to living in an unsettling society because it helps them to understand themselves as in control of their lives and futures. Such is the situation of sports television reporters. Hopefully future research will account for the possibility of a far more complex existence for those working in the cultural industries, especially hybrid fields such as sports television. The analysis in this study does not necessarily suggest that reporters in sports television face a more complicated work situation than media workers in other realms, but it does purport that the job of the sports television reporter is highly complex exactly because of the various identities they must negotiate and perform on a daily basis.

*Interpretation 2: The destabilization of hierarchies in the sports-media complex is forcing participants to quickly adapt to new technologies, convergence and corporate flexibility.*

Participants specifically stated that the industry was in a transition period, which they attributed to the speed at which information now travels and the technologies and platforms enabling that speedy flow of information. The evolution of the sports-media complex in the digital age is causing a destabilization of some of the established hierarchies participants in this study have become accustomed to. The most prominent is the primacy of professional sports journalists. Fans turned bloggers have begun to create their own sports media via the Internet and are infringing on the occupational jurisdiction of professional sports journalists. This unsettling and somewhat tenuous situation has forced reporters to quickly adapt to new technologies, convergence and ownership's unflinching concern for the bottom line. This destabilization may force participants to reevaluate their roles as sports journalists and complicate their professional identities. The increased competition may also be intensifying sports journalists' desire for professional status.

The sports television industry is experiencing serious competition for its place atop the sports-media complex hierarchy. This shift is being most forcefully felt by participants via the Internet and some of its associated technologies. The change revolves around the ability of the Internet to enable people other than sports journalists to produce and distribute sports media content for a mass audience, most commonly through blogs or websites. More and more athletes have their own websites, which they use to release a variety of information and bypass the sports media. Some also use social-networking



media such as *Twitter* to further foster a relationship with fans. The sports journalist filled this role once upon a time. One participant referred to athletes' use of blogs and social media as their own personal public relations team. The increasing frequency of franchises acting as their own news outlets through the use of their own websites, and in some cases reporters, is another aspect of the declining primacy of the professional sports journalist directly related to the growth of the Internet.

Modern technology, most prominently blogs, allows ordinary sports fans to watch games, listen to press conferences and offer their own commentary and opinion while enabling them to reach a large audience (Ballard, 2006). Sports bloggers also take advantage of information that professional sports journalists neglect such as more opinionated content and rumor and gossip (Lowrey, 2006). It is not uncommon for stories that first appear on blogs to then become fodder for the mainstream sports media, perhaps revealing sports journalism's insecurity regarding its relationship with the sports audience. Numerous participants cited a high-profile instance of this involving a member of the city's baseball team who a blogger suggested was using performance-enhancing drugs. These stories are generally best described as gossip and/or innuendo; however, some blogs have developed better reputations than others.

In essence, the Internet and its associated technologies have created an interesting paradox. On one hand they enable sports stars to take greater control of their image and minimize the traditional sports media's control of it; however, these same technologies also allow virtually everyone to gossip about them through blog posts and tweets and to infringe upon their privacy with cell phone pictures and videos. Technology has, in

effect, created a more complicated battle to see who can profit from the celebrity of sports stars.

These developments contribute to sports journalists' diminishing journalistic authority and have begun to transform, and in some ways undermine, the relationship between sports journalists and fans as well as with reporters' information sources. As Deuze (2007) has stated, once the audience is able to make its own media, the professional identity of the media is significantly undermined. In its attempt to evolve, this regional sports channel has made a concerted effort to embrace the Internet with its own web-based reporting staff of eight. The channel also recently purchased a popular city-based rumor and gossip website and added it to its own. Still the rise of the Internet has brought with it anxiety over job security for some of the participants in this study.

In addition to job insecurity, multiskilling has added to the daily workload of some participants such as Deb. The beat reporter for the city's professional basketball team, Deb has been converted into a hybrid reporter who contributes to both the website and the channel's television programming. Management has asked several of the channel's television reporters to also produce content for the website. In short, Deb and other participants have accrued more responsibility with no increase in resources. Furthermore, the destabilization of sports media hierarchies has provided management with an ideal reason for imposing these changes on its personnel. While these participants have gained a greater degree of creative autonomy in their jobs – one of the clear attractions of working in the media industries – management has gained greater flexibility in its workforce (Sennett, 1998; Deuze, 2007). According to Deuze (2007), the tension

between the “scientific management” of the company and the “creative autonomy” of the media workers typifies work in media organizations (p. 51).

Technology, such as the use of texting to improve communication with sources, has made reporters’ jobs easier in some ways. However, according to participants, the difficulties definitely outnumber the benefits. First and foremost, participants cited an overall increase in their workloads. Many pointed directly to the Internet as being responsible for the reality that there is more information, published more frequently from more outlets than ever before, and all of it requires some level of review from those who produce the news. The channel’s assistant news director pointed to changes in writing style and decision-making that are the direct result of the Internet’s influence. Some reporters discussed the pressure to remain unique in their production of content and in some cases participants were even searching for exactly what type of stories the fans now want from their sports media. The end result for newsgathering personnel at this regional sports channel is that they are experiencing greater difficulty and more stressful work situations in their daily jobs due to the changes taking place to the sports-media complex in the digital age and their organization’s attempts to evolve with them.

Participants have been dealing with the aforementioned changes in part by accepting the imperatives of convergence and employing the latest technology in their efforts. The television reporters in this study demonstrated the ability to adapt quickly, just as they did in their negotiation of their professional identities. Such alacrity has not been a traditional trait of reporters in other media. Most have embraced the channel’s website and what they see as opportunities to enhance their versatility in an evolving field. Most have also heeded the station requirement to involve themselves in some type

of online social-networking, which essentially acts as a form of self-promotion. Some participants appear to be anxious and fearful about their role at the channel based on the precarious working conditions of the sports-media complex in the digital age. Such sentiments and situations reveal the primacy of the corporation over all else.

It is obvious that in the evolving sports-media complex what it means to be a sports journalist is changing. Traditional notions of the sports journalism profession are being challenged in a variety of ways. Sennett's (1998) keys to navigating the "culture of the new capitalism" are especially appropriate here – letting go of the past and accepting fragmentation and constant change. The question then is, will sports reporters' identities become even more fragmented as they attempt to deal with this transition period in the sports-media complex?

*Interpretation 3: The institutional pressure applied by corporate ownership has forged a powerful influence on the daily work routines and decision-making of participants.*

The parent corporation of this regional sports channel has effectively achieved what many have long feared about corporate ownership of journalistic outlets: it has become a powerful influence on the day-to-day decision-making of those who manufacture content. The ownership situation in this case – the regional sports channel is partly owned by the city's professional basketball and hockey teams and has partnerships with the baseball and football teams – is not uncommon in sports television (Strauss, 1998; Kramer, 2002; Moss, 2008). The journalism industry is certainly not unfamiliar with intervention by ownership. While documented instances are rare, Hesmondhalgh

(2002) stresses that self-censorship is the bigger concern, something that is evident among participants in this study. The newsroom situation in this study bears a strong resemblance to the notion of “licensed autonomy” (Curran, 1990). While sports reporters are not responsible for informing the citizenry on matters of public interest for democracy’s sake as hard news journalists do, the ability of a parent corporation to inculcate such a mindset in its personnel should raise serious questions and concerns in the journalism and media industries.

While the pervasive influence of the parent company was undoubtedly a factor in the daily work of the regional sports channel’s staff, corporate management appears to choose its battles wisely, imposing its will on the stories and issues with the greatest potential for controversy. The two stories commonly cited by participants as examples both involved the trading away of immensely popular stars, one on the hockey team and one on the basketball team. Corporate’s interest was to have the focus on the incoming players and not the outgoing stars. This contrasted with the station’s preference to devote the large majority of its coverage to the tenure and memories of the departing stars, which in their minds were the bigger and better stories. I was actually employed at the station at the time of the trade of the hockey star and recall being told in a staff meeting that any further coverage devoted to this star player would result in termination. Some participants relayed that the same edict had been given during the basketball player’s trade story. Others stated they had actually called the chairman of the company to confirm that such a threat had been made and were told by him that his concern was that the coverage be fair and accurate.

Participants also documented the significant pressure applied to the station by the ownership of the city's sports franchises. This creates a difficult position for reporters and one akin to that described above because of the ownership circumstances. Each team pays close attention the treatment of the other and uses this to modify the station's coverage in a manner more consistent with their interests. According to participants, the city's professional football team genuinely feels that it is in a publicity competition with the city's professional baseball team and actively attempts to negotiate preferential coverage. Participants could not recall many instances of individual sources such as athletes or coaches pressuring them for positive coverage. From their perspective, franchises and ownership were the ones consumed with the tenor, placement and content of media coverage. Sometimes franchises approach newsroom personnel with their concerns but more often they go straight to management. Participants also discussed in detail instances of reporters getting too close to athletes and coaches and significantly undermining their duty to the fan because of that specific conflict of interest.

The considerable influence of ownership on the work of reporters is also connected to the fragmented identity of the participants in this study. The company appears to have been successful in impressing upon some participants the need to identify with the parent company first and foremost. This runs counter to the journalistic value of objectivity or neutrality. Interestingly, many participants chose to use "balance" instead of objectivity to describe their approach to their journalistic work. Such pressure to remain within the constraints of the reporter's "licensed autonomy" conflicts with the reporter's identification as a journalist. For the sports television reporter, these lines may already be blurred because of the hybrid nature of sports television content but,

nonetheless, such identity contradictions increase the difficulty and complexity of the reporter's job.

It is no revelation in the context of contemporary media ownership that economic imperatives threaten journalistic autonomy. However, Hesmondhalgh (2002) argues that autonomy continues to resound as a professional principle and as a defense against managerial demands which, based on this study, are becoming increasingly difficult to accept. Big media corporations are gaining the upper hand in the battle over creative autonomy in journalism and the cultural industries. This raises serious questions about the professional credibility of our sports media and the stories they cover. As the power and influence of sport in society increases, this becomes an even larger concern. However, the biggest questions inevitably become: (1) how widespread is such institutional influence? (2) is the influence of the parent corporation in this study comparable in any way to those of some of our most credible and important journalism media outlets?

## **Conclusion**

Analysis of the findings in this study reveals the complexity of working in the contemporary sports-media complex and the conditions reporters and field producers at the regional sports channel in this study are attempting to deal with and adapt to. Participants must negotiate and perform a fragmented professional identity in their day-to-day work in sports television. Feminist scholars in both the journalism and sports journalism fields have addressed the issue of a fragmented professional identity; however, this research expands the population studied in this context to include men. In

addition to a reporter's social identity such as gender or race, he or she may also identify themselves as journalists, entertainers, fans, celebrities or employees. The ideologies of these multiple identities often conflict with one another, which often makes the work of reporters difficult in a variety of ways. The negotiation and performance of multiple identities adds to the increasing complexity of producing sports television in the digital age.

The Internet and many associated technologies are destabilizing traditional hierarchies in the sports-media complex and are forcing participants to quickly adapt to new technologies, convergence and corporate flexibility. The Internet's ability to enable everyone to produce their own sports media content is transforming the dynamic between sports journalists and athletes and fans. Athletes have more control over their images through the use of blogging and such social-networking web sites as *Twitter*; however, athletes are also faced with greater infringements on the control of their image and their privacy because of these very same technologies. Fans can gossip about them and post stories, videos and pictures of them. In essence, these new technologies have created a new site for the battle over sports stars' celebrity. Franchises are also using the Internet to control the message they want to present to the public through the creation of their own websites and the use of their own reporters. Participants' attempts to deal with destabilization include becoming multiskilled and embracing technology and convergence. This increasing flexibility of the workforce is a development that is in corporate ownership's best interest. One thing is certain; while the primacy of professional sports journalists in the sports-media complex is being challenged, the primacy of corporate interest in the bottom line is not.



The final interpretation of the findings in this study reveals that the institutional pressure applied by corporate ownership exerts a powerful influence on the daily work routines and decision-making of participants. While direct corporate intervention is only used on rare occasions, stories with the most potential for controversy, self-censorship is visible in the work at this media outlet. The conflict of interest created by the ownership situation that participants work under places their identity as journalists in direct conflict with the identity of loyal employees. The implications of such a corporate influence on the work and content of the station are obvious.

### **Recommendations**

I would like to offer recommendations based on the findings, analysis and conclusions of this research. The recommendations that follow are for: (1) reporters in sports television, (2) regional sports channels, and (3) mass communication researchers.

#### **Recommendations for Sports Reporters.**

The hope is that the findings and interpretations from this study raise awareness of the complicated nature of the sports reporter's work in the sports-media complex. Heightened awareness of reporter struggles with the tensions inherent to their jobs is an important first step to addressing them. However, sports journalists must strive to be more aware of the conflicts with traditional journalism values that they create for themselves. They must offer more than lip service to these ideals if they truly desire

professional journalist status. Television sports reporters should strongly consider drafting their own code of ethics or conduct and resolve to follow it.

Reporters could also afford to be more sympathetic and understanding of the issues sources face, particularly athletes and coaches, as well as their complaints about the media. While the participants in this study appeared to appreciate many of these issues and complaints, there is also a tendency from reporters in general to dismiss them as trumped up or mistaken. Too often the argument is that because of the money athletes and coaches make in the contemporary sports world, they should simply deal with the headaches that are associated with it. However, such a view only serves to sustain the tension that exists between athletes and reporters. Both sides fail to recognize just how interdependent their relationship is. One change in particular that could go a long way toward engendering a more positive view of the media from athletes and franchises would be to set guidelines for the coverage of the private affairs of athletes as well as rumor and gossip stories.

The changes taking place in the sports-media complex are necessitating that reporters adequately prepare for technological change and convergence. These will be the defining characteristics of the sports-media complex of the future. Perhaps most important are social skills. Improved communication will be equally important, including a willingness to discuss with management some of the issues that prove problematic for reporters in their everyday work.

While some of these measures may improve certain identity situations for reporters, the truth is that issues revolving around gender or race will not change substantially until the status and makeup of the sports-media complex does. Its masculine

and sometimes hyper-masculine constitution naturally creates conflict and tension for those outside of the white male ideal. While some progress has been made in this regard, overall progress has unfortunately been quite slow.

### **Recommendations for Regional Sports Channels.**

I will restrict my recommendations to regional sports channels because of the specificity of my study and the proliferation and impact of such stations over the last decade and a half. Remaining optimistic about the potential for change in a large and powerful media conglomerate such as the parent company of the regional sports channel in this study is no easy task. Most importantly, management of the regional sports network in this study needs to be more conscious of the complications reporters face on a daily basis because of the tensions inherent to their work, especially for women and racial minorities. It is important that managers keep the lines of communication open and don't dismiss individual opinions and suggestions on topics and issues. The move toward convergence and an increased presence on the Internet appears to be leading to overworked reporters and staff. In such a situation the content and programming could suffer, which could alienate the discerning sports viewer. Sports networks risk this at their own peril.

The parent company of this channel has carefully cultivated a significant influence over decisions made on a daily basis; however, direct intervention on stories is an affront to free speech and journalists and should be avoided at all costs. This is another potential way to lose station credibility and quickly alienate the sports audience. Furthermore, negative publicity from such scenarios could be considerable. The

deteriorating relationship with athletes, coaches and franchises should also be of major concern to sports channels. Management can do a much better job of actively developing working relationships with franchises and players alike. One possible way of accomplishing this is the aforementioned setting of boundaries for what kinds of coverage is off-limits regarding players' private and personal lives. Finally, it is recommended that regional sports channels such as the one in this study work with their employees to draft a code of professional ethics or conduct and help them follow it.

### **Recommendations for Future Research.**

Ideally this study would have included a closer examination of the texts created by this regional sports channel; however, time and resources make limits necessary on any research project and this one is certainly no different. Future researchers would be wise to analyze texts and any connections they may have to changes in the sports-media complex or the specific sports media industry or organization under study. One suggestion is to analyze texts on a micro level or more specifically to shadow reporters during a day in the field followed by an analysis of the text produced. Longitudinal studies in this vein could also provide useful insight. This would also create an opportunity to examine individual reporter decisions in specific cases and explore the tension in media work between creative autonomy and managerial control.

A second suggestion for further study would be to delve deeper into the professional identities reporters assume and explore how they are negotiated and performed on a case-by-case, individual basis. Scholars should also be interested in the growing power or identification with the media organization. Researchers would be wise

to examine the socialization of new employees into a specific media organization's culture or they could discuss the subject in-depth with longer-tenured employees.

Finally, one area of research sorely lacking in the area of reporter-source relationships is the perspective of the source. The source has had no voice in scholarly work for far too long. Certainly the data acquired from such a study could at least provide unique insight from another viewpoint. The journalist has been privileged in this sense since the beginning of research in this realm. This is not altogether surprising considering the difficulty of gaining access to such sources. I had attempted to speak with several professional athletes for this study but did not have an adequate relationship with any in order to achieve this research goal. In the contemporary sports-media complex source interviews could also provide useful information regarding source perceptions of social-networking media and their use.

Hesmondhalgh (2002) has observed that for all the debate over cultural studies and its significance in everyday life there has been precious little study of cultural workers. As Deuze (2007) has stated, "if the media in the broadest possible sense are the sites of the struggles over meaning and symbolic exchange in global society, it becomes essential to understand the working lives of the people within the creative industries" (p. 82). This study has been an attempt to add to that sparse literature by examining a key component of the sports-media complex, the work of sports television reporters. As hard news journalism trends more and more toward a hybrid resembling sports journalism, a keen understanding of the sports media could offer important insights into the role of media in democratic society. Regardless, the standing of sport as a fundamental

institution in its own right demands more studies specific to the practices and dynamics of the sports-media complex.

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## APPENDIX A

### REPORTER/FIELD PRODUCER INFORMATION LIST

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Experience</b>	<b>Beat</b>
Don	51	Male	African-American	30 years	Football
Robert	46	Male	African-American	23.3 years	General
Deb	44	Female	Caucasian	18 years	Basketball
Gene	38	Male	Caucasian	13 years	General
Jim	39	Male	Caucasian	16 years	Hockey
Lisa	43	Female	Caucasian	15 years	Baseball
Chris	49	Male	Caucasian	27 years	General
Abigail	32	Female	Caucasian	6 years	General
Larry	63	Male	Caucasian	40 years	Football
Norman	38	Male	Caucasian	17 years	General
Jay	28	Male	Caucasian	5 years	General
Tom	36	Male	Caucasian	12 years	General
Jennifer	25	Female	Caucasian	1 year	General
Meg	25	Female	Caucasian	> 1 year	Hockey & Baseball

## APPENDIX B

### CODING SCHEME DEVELOPMENT CHART

*(1) Coding scheme version 1*

Sept. - Nov. 2009

Throughout the data collection process I was constantly reviewing the salient points that were emerging from my interviews and observations and relating them to my literature review and prior experiences as a sports television field producer. This was the initial coding framework, which I used to present initial findings at the NASSS conference/convention.

*(2) Coding scheme version 2*

Dec. 2009

Following completion of data collection, data was re-read and notes were taken during the review of interview transcripts and field notes. Initial coding of data took place and coded data was placed in categories.

*(3) Coding scheme version 3*

January 2010

The refining of the coding scheme was based upon further review and reflection of the data. Dialogue and discussion with colleagues also factored into the revisions. A small number of codes were added, others were made more specific. No codes were dropped or eliminated however some became irrelevant due to a lack of saliency.

## APPENDIX C

### QUESTION GUIDE

#### Icebreakers

- For transcriptionist: name, position, sports reporting responsibilities, career/tenure in television/sports television
- Why are you in sports television? (How did you get here?) What do you like/dislike most about this job?

#### Tier one

- Tell me about a typical/routine day working as a sports reporter/field producer for SportsNet.
- What kinds of pressures and constraints do you work under every day? How do these impact your daily work routines?
- I would like to know more about your sports news sources. Can you give me some examples of exactly who is a source?
- Has this changed at all during your time in this field?
- Are some sources more important than others? How important are sources to your work?
- Sports reporters often talk about how sources try to influence what gets reported. They only want “positive” things publicized about themselves and their sport. Can you talk about this?
- How would you describe your relationship with your sources? (friendship?)
- Is it a challenge to remain “objective” in your work? Is it even necessary?
- What are some of the obstacles to maintaining “objectivity” while working at SportsNet?
- Can you recall specific examples where it was difficult to remain objective for personal reasons or because of Comcast’s influence?

- Have you ever been “sanctioned” by a source for a story that made them unhappy? How do they/you handle such situations?
- Do such instances have legitimate effects on your work and the stories you produce?
- Have you ever suppressed a story or elements of a story in order to not offend a source or maintain that relationship with the source?

#### Tier two

- As you think about interviewing sources, what is the biggest challenge?
- Do you notice tension (or distrust) in the relationship between reporters and sources (athletes, coaches, etc.)?
- What do you think the roots of this tension are?
- What are your strategies for coping or dealing with annoyed or hostile sources?
- How has your status as a white woman/black male/white male impacted your experience in the sports television field? How has it impacted your interactions with athletes and coaches?
- How do you think you’re perceived by your sources?
- Do you see the relationship between reporter and source improving, deteriorating or remaining the same as it is now? What can be done about it?

#### Tier three

- How has new media changed the way you do your job?
- Has the Internet affected the way you interact with sports news sources? How?
- Have any other new technologies/media changed the way you do your job? How?

#### Tier four (lower priority)

- Do you ever consider what the audience is expecting to hear from your sources during your interactions with them?
- Can you distinguish between the sources in the various professional sports leagues as to which sources are the most difficult to deal with? Can you offer an explanation as to why you believe this is so?

## VITA

### Jason James Genovese

Jason Genovese's current work examines the reporter-source relationship and the contemporary state of sports television in the sports-media complex. In addition to issues concerning the sports media, he is interested in journalism, new media as well as cultural studies. He has also explored research in sport history. His research is situated within mass communications/media studies.

Jason received his Bachelor's Degree in Mass Communications from King's College (PA) and a Master's Degree in Broadcast Journalism from Syracuse University. He is currently a tenure-track instructor in the Department of Mass Communications at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania and a Doctoral Candidate with a projected graduation date of December 2010. He has presented research at international, national and regional conferences and has also co-authored a book with his father, *The Pottsville Maroons and the NFL's Stolen Championship of 1925*. He has experience teaching a variety of courses both theoretical and skills-based: Video Editing, Video Production I, Video Production II, Telecommunications Workshop, Radio Reporting, Newswriting, RTF Authorship, Mass Communications & Pop Arts, and Cinema Appreciation. Jason also has professional experience in the television industry where he has worked as a producer in local television news and at a regional sports network.