MANUFACTURING SPORTS BLOGS: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY AND PRACTICE OF NETWORKED SPORTS BLOGGING

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by
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ABSTRACT

This study interrogates the organization of production at SB Nation—a major independent network of more than 320 commercial sports blogs offering news, opinion, and community discussions about specific major professional teams and big time college sports programs. Two lines of analysis are pursued. Drawing, first, on the political economy of culture perspective, the researcher examines SB Nation’s resource allocation—a process that sets broad limits on the range and nature of media production and textual forms. The researcher “listened in” to discussion by and about SB Nation in trade journals and the business press, and “burrowed” into available documentation about the company, including best practices documents. The second line of analysis is an adaptation of newsroom ethnography. Rather than directly observe bloggers at work, a battery of short, daily interviews were conducted with nine bloggers exploring their daily blogwork routines—practices that shape sports blogs’ standard fare. The study argues that SB Nation’s commercial success is predicated on the allocation of resources to developing a platform for bloggers and their communities to engage in chatter about the men’s commercial sphere of sports. In this, SB Nation manufactures a large, “demogenic” prosumer commodity that it sells to corporate advertisers. The bloggers, most of them minimally compensated, create content on a near daily basis as a means of pursuing and performing their fandom. Some also work under the hope that their blogging could lead to future employment opportunities. In their efforts to produce content as fans, for fans, SB Nation bloggers face pressures and constraints. Since most have to work day jobs to support themselves, blogging competes for time with personal and professional obligations. Bloggers employ work routines that help them negotiate the temporal discontinuities between their production processes (assembly-
time), that of the sports world (event-time), and that of their readers (audience-time).

Specifically, participants noted strategies for dividing labor, scheduling their blogging, and using news aggregators to monitor the sports world. The implications of this organizational structure for women’s sports coverage are considered.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Networked Sports Blogging: Context and Texts

A “typhoon of imploding bluster”

Two 2008 events signaled the “arrival” of sports blogging as a major player in the sports media landscape—neither event featured a tackle, dunk, or home run. First, in April, sports journalist H. G. “Buzz” Bissinger appeared on Bob Costas’ HBO sports talk program Costas Now for a panel discussion of “Internet Media.” Bissinger was best known as the author of Friday Night Lights—a non-fiction bestseller about a Texas high school football team’s season that NBC adapted as popular prime-time drama. On the panel, Bissinger represented the traditional sports journalism establishment. Professional football player, Braylon Edwards, and sports blogger, Will Leitch, join him on the panel. At the time, Leitch was editor of Deadspin [deadspin.com]—a popular, if often sensationalist and occasionally crude, sports blog. As The New York Times’ Richard Sandomir (2008: para. 2-3) described it:

Bissinger entered in an extreme state of annoyance and outrage about bloggers’ writing skills, their lack of journalistic ethics and their absence of credentials. His distaste for Leitch and his ilk was communicated with scornful body language. ‘I think blogs are dedicated to cruelty, they’re dedicated to dishonesty, they’re dedicated to speed,’ Bissinger said.

Bissinger and Leitch’s exchange on Costas Now would “go viral,” especially within the sports blogosphere, as an exemplar of the fear and loathing of some in the sports media establishment for their brash new media counterparts. Two hours after the show, Leitch (2008b: para. 5, 1) took to his blog (as bloggers do), and he characterized Bissinger’s “typhoon of imploding bluster” as a reflection of wider sports media sentiments:
Buzz [Bissinger] is not alone. Sure, he might be metaphorically alone, raining spittle on the imaginary demons that clearly haunt him. But if you don’t think that almost every single person—with obvious, clear exceptions—who was on [Costas Now’s series of panels] last night didn't come up to him afterwards and give him a fist pound and a "yeah, we really struck back tonight!" well, you weren't there. This really is what many of them think. Though most are a little calmer about it.

In academic terms, Bissinger’s appearance on Costas Now reflected the unfolding struggle over journalistic authority in the contemporary sports media landscape. His critiques smacked of an effort to not just decry a form and content he found objectionable, but to reinforce a historically specific, professional notion of what “real journalism” is—a notoriously sticky task even before the digital age (Deuze, 2005; Zelizer, 2004). As Carlson (2007: 275) explains: “The discourse on the status and credibility of blogs can be viewed as a struggle by journalists to define what counts as journalism and to stave off incursions from competing informational forms.”

Bissinger later qualified his Costas Now comments. He commended “very informational” blogs, including Beerleaguer (a Philadelphia Phillies blog) and Pro Football Talk (a general NFL blog), but he reiterated that these outlets were the exception, not the rule: “The younger generation likes the snarky tone … I don’t think they really appreciate good writing and reporting, and those, to me, are precious arts … It’s all some interactive gangbang” (Reilly, 2008: 2). Reveling in their snarky tone, Deadspin.com readers voted Bissinger into the Deadspin Hall of Fame for his appearance on Costas Now (Leitch, 2008a).
“Digital media and technology luminaries”

A second, less publicized 2008 event also signaled sports blogging’s arrival. Indeed, it further propelled and shaped the emerging institution. In October, the SB Nation network of sports blogs secured $5 million in venture capital investment from “a group of digital media and technology luminaries” (Fisher, 2008b: para. 1). Leading the investment round was Accel Partners—a Silicon Valley venture capital firm, and an early Facebook investor. Other financiers included: media industry power broker, Allen & Co.; former AOL executive and owner of three Washington, D.C. area sports teams, Ted Leonsis; Brent Jones of Northgate Capital (a venture capital and private equity firm); former Yahoo! executives Dan Rosensweig and Jeff Weiner; and executives from the private equity firm, Providence Equity Partners (Fisher, 2008b; Kee, 2009).

While Accel Partners, Northgate Capital, and Providence Equity Partners are all in the private equity business, these SB Nation investments were not the sort of leveraged buy-out (LBO) that private equity firms are notorious for. In those deals, private equity firms use their massive pools of private capital to buy out indebted public companies, take them private for “restructuring” (including layoffs in all but the most profitable operations), and then sell the stripped-down company, often at huge profits (Bettig, 2009; Crain, 2009; Henwood, 2007). SB Nation’s investors operated, instead, as venture capitalists, investing private capital in a promising start-up (i.e., one with high profit potential) with an eye toward the blog network’s future sale or initial public offering (PrivCo, n.d.).

SB Nation started in 2003 from a single Oakland Athletics (baseball) blog. Over the subsequent months and years, the network steadily expanded. By October 2008 SB Nation included 150 blogs, climbing to 320 by June 2012. Nearly all of these blogs focus on news,
opinion, and discussion of a single major league team or big-time intercollegiate athletics program: Athletics Nation, for instance, exclusively covers the Oakland Athletics (MLB); Blazer’s Edge for the Portland Trailblazers (NBA); and Dawg Sports for the Georgia Bulldogs (NCAA).\(^1\) The company employs the slogan “pro quality, fan perspective,” and it unabashedly embraces the fan biases of its blogs’ editorial staffs (Plambeck, 2010; n.d.-a). Writing passionately, as fans, these blogs produce content several times a day during their team’s season and continue to generate posts on a near-daily basis throughout the offseason. Even with this productivity, the network keeps its labor costs low. Each site’s “lead bloggers” received a small monthly stipend (among interviewees for this study, not more than $200 month).

SB Nation complements its “fan-centric” editorial philosophy with a community-building orientation. The company provides readers with discussion and publishing tools that draw upon and extend sports fans’ desires to share sports information and opinions with one another. An SB Nation’s founder, Tyler Bleszinski described the network’s communities as “similar to an online bar. A place where everyone knows your name and where the swivel chair at your computer becomes a bar stool upon which we will pontificate and ruminate together” (Bleszinski, 2004: para. 1).

SB Nation’s $5 million 2008 fundraising round was a sign of things to come for the network and for commercial sports blogging more generally. Bankoff conducted two more fundraising rounds (with many of the same investors) over the subsequent two years,

\(^1\) Some of the network’s blogs do focus on entire sports, such the Waggle Room for golf, and Bloody Elbow for mixed martial arts.

\(^2\) Unique visitors is a web metric (or measurement) for the number of different people that access a web site in a given period of time. Most sites and metrics companies use web site server data to calculate unique visitors. The web site places “cookies” on each visitor’s
amassing $23.5 million in total financing for the start-up (Ali, 2009; Kramer, 2010). With major venture capital financing, SB Nation and other brand-name networks and platforms, such as Bleacher Report and Big Lead Sports, established themselves as leading firms in the sector. Expanding to include hundreds of blogs each, traffic and advertising revenue for these networks also grew. According to comScore (the leading web metrics firm), between August 2010 and April 2011, SB Nation’s traffic grew 167% to 10.9 million unique visitors per month² (Figure 1).

Like other web properties SB Nation contends that it actually attracts a far greater number of unique visitors than comScore’s third party data indicates—more than 20 million per month based on the network’s internal server data (Fisher, 2011). As of April 2012, the network of 320 blogs ranked among traffic leaders for not just independent sports properties, but U.S. sports web destinations more broadly (Table 1).

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² Unique visitors is a web metric (or measurement) for the number of different people that access a web site in a given period of time. Most sites and metrics companies use web site server data to calculate unique visitors. The web site places “cookies” on each visitor’s computer, which then identify users as new or returning each time they visit the site. Somewhat differently, comScore directly monitors the web habits of its roughly two million user panel with software installed on each individual’s computer (comScore, 2012).
With their growth, deep wells of content, and low (or absent) editorial labor costs, independent blog networks, including SB Nation, became increasingly attractive acquisition options for major media companies (Fisher, 2011b). USA Today Sports Media Group purchased Big Lead Sports in January 2012. As of April 2012, not all Big Lead Sports sites had been folded into USA Today’s traffic figures, hence the separate listings.
purchased Big Lead Sports for a reported $30 million, and Fox Sports Interactive Media purchased Yardbarker for an undisclosed sum (Fisher, 2010b, 2012a). These kinds of acquisitions can produce big paydays for the venture capital financiers who got in on each start-up’s ground floor. As SB Nation investor Brent Jones said, “You show a venture capital guy a large market like this with no defined winner yet, and they’re drooling” (Fisher, 2011b: para. 19). With SB Nation’s traffic, advertising sales, and overall revenue each doubling between August 2010 and August 2011, Fisher (2011b) estimated SB Nation’s value at $150 million in October 2011.

**Gendered texts and commercial contexts**

Framed against Costas Now’s Bissinger-Leitch exchange, there is the temptation to approach sports blogging with an eye toward the distinctions between sports blogging and journalism in terms of tone, ethics, and access. These are questions scholars, critics, journalists, and bloggers surely will (and should) continue to interrogate and debate. Crafts charged with conveying accounts of the (sports) world to audiences deserve rigorous critique, regardless of platform; however, the emphasis on what distinguishes sports journalism from sports blogging may distract from more fundamental, if subtle, similarities between the two. The content or texts of these most visible and influential online independents are produced by new faces that relate to teams and audiences in new ways; yet, in the range of sports they discuss and their commercial orientations, these networks are largely indistinguishable from their legacy institutional counterparts that have defined and marketed their products in terms of professional (journalistic) norms and standards (e.g., ESPN.com; CBSsports.com). For instance, like traditional sports journalism, the web’s most visible independent sports blog networks and platforms are all organized as vehicles for corporate advertising. Further, these
networks all focus overwhelmingly on the same men’s commercial sphere of sports that traditional media long have—the major leagues and big-time intercollegiate football and men’s basketball.

This study is not a systematic examination of the types of posts, words, or images that are prevalent on sports blogs, an approach known as content analysis (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005). Nor does this study seek to understand the meanings or likely interpretations of that content, an approach that may be understood as textual analysis (McKee, 2003). Working from the presumption that certain production practices make some media texts more or less likely than others, this study focuses, instead, on how those sports blog texts are made. That said, a quick perusal of any of these online independents’ offerings supports the assertion that the men’s commercial sphere of sports dominates the news agenda and discourse in these blog networks.

For instance, the menu bars across the top of a sports website or blog offer guides to the types of content available from that outlet, as well as tips to readers about the content the outlet considers most important and appropriate for public consumption (Meân, 2011). The menu bars for the major online independents offer almost mirror images of the menu bars at mainstream outlets, such as ESPN.com or FoxSports.com, with the men’s commercial sports sphere dominating the recommended content options. For instance, in addition to UFC, Golf, Tennis, and Olympics news, SB Nation’s menu bar offers the same following options as ESPN.com: NFL, MLB, NBA, NHL, NCAAF, NCAAB, Soccer, NASCAR, and Fantasy (in nearly the same order). SB Nation’s menu also features a “Local” drop-down menu for news about men’s professional and big-time intercollegiate programs in 21 major U.S. metro areas, thus reinforcing the attention on the men’s commercial sports sphere.
More systematic analyses of blog (and blog-community) content support the assertion that the most popular independent commercial sports blogs marginalize women’s sports. In examining images on ten of the web’s most popular sports blogs, Clavio and Eagleman (2011) found few posts that specifically addressed women’s sports leagues or individual female athletes. Just 7.1% of photographs featured a woman as the primary subject, and where women did appear, those images tended to be of a non-sport setting or of a sexualized nature. In their study of major college football teams’ “Fan Based Internet Sports Communities,” Porter, Wood, and Benigni (2011) found that 32.3% of FBISC front pages summarized or linked to mainstream media stories, and 22.3% featured original analysis of mainstream media coverage. In other words, aside from organizing their editorial focus and communities around the men’s commercial teams that already have heavy media coverage, these FBISCs amplified media coverage of this sports sphere. These findings are consistent with previous analyses of commercial sports media content, wherein women’s sports and female athletes have long been marginalized and trivialized (Bernstein, 2002; Duncan, 2006). Critical media scholars argue that these processes shape our culture’s seemingly “common sense” associations between men and masculinity and sport’s celebrated values, including competition, power, and control. Women and femininity, in turn, become associated with inferiority, frailty and passivity (Duncan, 2006; Messner, Dunbar, & Hunt, 2000). As Jhally (1989a: 84) puts it, sports “naturalize forms of social organization that have a political and social basis.”

Beyond their focus on a narrow range of potential sports topics, SB Nation and other leading independents share another key similarity with traditional sports media—each are

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3 do not identify the remaining 45.4% in their accounting of the data.
vehicles for exposing media consumers to the branded messages of corporate advertisers. A visitor to SB Nation, for instance, would find himself regularly exposed to the commercial appeals of major brands, such as Bud Light, Samsung, Sprint, and Head & Shoulders. Like their newspaper and broadcasting predecessors, it is primarily through advertising revenue that SB Nation and its competitors operate as profit-maximizing media companies (Fisher, 2011b).

These two commercial media phenomena—1) attention to the men’s commercial sports sphere and 2) reliance on advertiser support—are historically intertwined (Lowes, 1999). While the media industry has long contended that it merely gives viewers, readers, and listeners the men’s commercial sports they want, doing so is only a means to an end. Financial success in advertiser-supported media hinges less on giving viewers what they want and more on giving advertisers who they want—large audiences full of consumers from target demographics (Meehan, 2005; Smythe, 1981). Conventional wisdom in the media industry has long held that extensive coverage of men’s commercial sports is the most effective way to attract advertisers’ most coveted demographic—young, relatively affluent males—and to attract them in large numbers. In short, media outlets produce sports content to attract or “manufacture” young male audiences that can be sold to advertisers (Bellamy, 2006; Lowes, 1999; McChesney, 1989). Consistent with this imperative, the leading independent online properties tout not just their large audiences, but also their success in aggregating a young male demographic (DuBois, 2010).

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This study uses male pronouns for SB Nation bloggers and users. This is in an effort to highlight both the network’s demographic make-up and the gendered nature of production and consumption in the network’s blog-communities.
“Why?” questions

While new media always build on the forms and structures of preceding media (Briggs & Burke, 2002), the content and commercial orientation of sports blog networks like SB Nation should not be construed as natural or inevitable. There is nothing about a blog, structurally, that makes anyone talk about a particular topic or do so in a particular way. When a blogger clicks to create a new post, he or she is presented with a literal and figurative blank page. Moreover, where institutional pressures and constraints (e.g., the need for large audiences; beat reporting norms) powerfully shaped the practices and products of traditional media (Fishman, 1980; Lowes, 1999; McChesney, 2008), many of these pressures and constraints are—at least in the abstract—no longer problems for bloggers (Hardin, Zhong, & Corrigan, 2012). In other words, bloggers do not need advertising subsidy, access to official sources, or even readership to remain sustainable. Absent these structural pressures and constraints, blogwork can be organized in different ways than traditional, professional journalism—employing new processes, focusing on new people, and operating under new imperatives (Lowrey, 2006: 574).

By circumventing the “gatekeepers” (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009) of establishment media and removing the restrictive commercial pressures and constraints of news organizations (Fishman, 1980), some commentators argued that blogging opened avenues for the production of content that could challenge the status quo rather than reinforce it (e.g., Coleman, 2005; Gillmor, 2004). Blogging, it was argued, offered “a channel for authentic expression that is free from the repressive controls of traditional media” (Coleman, 2005: 276). Some women’s sports advocates, more specifically, saw the blogosphere as a space capable of challenging mainstream media’s marginalization and trivialization of female
athletes (e.g., H. Maxwell, 2009; Messner, 2002). As Hardin, Zhong, and Corrigan (2012: 56) explain:

The argument to justify non-coverage of women’s sports because they don’t “sell,” for instance, cannot keep a women’s sports fan—or thousands of them—from maintaining blogs that position women’s sport as important (and worthy of legal protection). Institutional decisions to marginalize female athletes based on beat-reporting norms also, in theory, dissipate in a blogosphere where individuals can form networks to promote traditionally marginalized sports and athletes; gatekeeping in its traditional sense, then, dissipates.

More than a decade into this journalistic revolution, it is unclear that power within the media system—sporting or otherwise—has shifted substantially. The bulk of independent bloggers appear reliant on the mainstream media for original reporting and topic selection, adopting institutional journalism’s range of perspectives and assumptions rather than providing an independent lens (Haas, 2005; Wall, 2005). The brief analysis of menu bars above, when paired with more systemic content analyses of sports blogs and FBISCs, suggests that these dynamics extend to the online sports space, too (Clavio & Eagleman, 2011; Porter et al., 2011).

Why would this be? Some have argued that since institutional pressures and journalistic norms are “muted” in the blogosphere, “social identity and cultural hegemony [are] more salient influences on decision-making about content” (Hardin et al., 2012: 56). In other words, compared to traditional journalists, bloggers have more freedom to select topics and construct coverage as they see fit. In this, content in the blogosphere presumably reflects the preferences and biases of individual bloggers and the broader culture more so than the
commercial imperatives of media organizations (e.g., manufacturing large audiences) or the professional norms and routines of media institutions (e.g., reliance on legitimated institutions and official sources). Across the sports blogosphere, and especially among the most visible platforms, including SB Nation, it is important to note that the producers and consumers of content are predominantly men ("From outside the press box," 2009; n.d.-a). Moreover, sports bloggers, like the broader culture, demonstrate ambivalent attitudes toward women’s sports (Hardin et al., 2012). Together, these dynamics offer a compelling explanation for the continued marginalization and trivialization of women’s sports in the blogosphere.

Can we assume, though, that organizational pressures and occupational norms play any less of an influential role in blogging than in traditional media, especially in large commercial blog networks such as SB Nation? Might the pressures and constraints under which networked sports bloggers create content merely be different from traditional media rather than “muted?” Further, do those differences necessarily challenge the power asymmetries of gender and commercialism embedded in sports media, or may those pressures and constraints actually amplify and extend the status quo’s power asymmetries?

Bloggers’ work routines offer a valuable entry point for exploring these questions. In their interviews with political bloggers, Lowrey and Latta (2008) found that bloggers, like other media producers, routinize their practices in response to the pressures and constraints of their work. Under the perception that people were paying attention, bloggers adopt a “persona” and temper overly opinionated, “unprofessional” posting. The “public gaze” also feeds a pressure to keep posting every day. Lacking full-time compensation or staff, bloggers schedule their posts around work and family time to keep up with (perceived) audience
expectations. To deal with a seemingly endless sea of possible topics to discuss, bloggers specialize in a given area. They lean on blogging “peer groups” and technologies like RSS feeds to regularly generate story ideas and reliable information about those areas of specialization. Without the access and resources to break their own news, bloggers integrate information reported by others with their own analysis and opinion.

The key point here is this: yes, bloggers may employ practices that diverge from those of traditional journalists, and, in this, they can produce news that differs from mainstream news accounts. As Mark Fishman (1980: 14) explains, “News is the result of the methods newsworkers employ. Were different methods used, different forms of news would result;” however, where bloggers routinize their practices—as Lowrey and Latta (2008) suggest they do—then those processes will produce routine content—“the standard fare that fills [blogs] day after day” (Fishman, 1980: 15) Thus, as critics, practitioners, and academics make observations about the content of sports blogs (and blog-communities), we can and should ask some of the same questions of those institutions that others have asked of traditional newsrooms: What work routines do bloggers at visible and influential sports blog networks, like SB Nation, use to create their standard fare? And how do pressures and constraints on bloggers’ work—both practical and cultural—shape those routines? This research asks, in particular: How is the production of content organized at SB Nation, and why is it organized the way it is?

**Studying sports blog production**

This research is a two-part case study of sports blog production at SB Nation. Following Murdock (1982), I first aim to make sense of how key individuals shaped the network’s development, organization, and goals and how those individuals’ actions were
constrained by the structural imperatives of commercial media on the web. For this analysis, I gathered information about the company through approaches common within the political economy of communications: by “burrowing” (Bettig, 2009) into documentation about SB Nation; and by “listening in” (R. Maxwell, 2003) to conversations of and about the company and its decision-makers in spaces like the trade press. In doing so, this “structural biography” offers an account of the organizational context within which production occurs at SB Nation—a context that, in part, sets the broad pressures and constraints for bloggers’ work routines.

My second line of analysis is an adaptation of “newsroom ethnography” (Fishman, 1980; Tuchman, 1978). I first conducted long interviews with nine SB Nation hockey and basketball bloggers. With these interviews, I aimed to understand the organization of “blogwork” at the network’s team-specific blogs and bloggers’ conceptions of their practice. Following Fishman (1980), though, my central interest in this micro-level analysis was bloggers’ work routines. Typically, newsroom ethnographers complement long interviews with some sort of direct or participant observation; it obviously behooves a researcher to actually see the routines newsworkers employ. Decentralized networks of online content producers create challenges for traditional observation techniques, though (Lowrey & Latta, 2008). Rather than physically observe bloggers’ practices, I conducted a series of short, daily interviews with each participant over the course of a week. In these daily interviews I aimed to identify bloggers’ work routines, and I sought to understand why they employed the routines that they did. Since the organization of media production shapes the range and nature of texts available for public consumption, examining SB Nation’s resource allocation and bloggers’ work routines offers insight into the growing network’s output.
1.2 SB Nation: A Descriptive Effort

Before pursuing these two lines of analysis, it is helpful to expand on my description of SB Nation. The following outlines the organization of SB Nation’s national, league, and local sites. I then more closely detail a focal point of this research—the network’s team-specific blog-communities.

**SB Nation’s national, league, and local sites**

Team-specific blogs, like Athletics Nation, Blazer’s Edge, and Dawg Sports, have functioned as the SB Nation network’s backbone since its early years; however, during the company’s “venture era” (from 2008 to the present), SB Nation complemented this team-specific focus with a multi-level network structure organized around media consumers’ national, league, and local sporting interests.

For several years, SBNation.com functioned as little more than a network directory—a list of links to each of the network’s team-specific blog-communities. These links are still accessible through SBNation.com; however, after a site re-designed in September 2009, this “central landing page” assumed a greater editorial role within the network. A combination of full-time editors and part-time contributors began publishing posts there about the day’s biggest national sports news and curating content from the network’s blogs and from elsewhere on the web (Bankoff, 2009a). According to data from the web metrics company Quantcast, SBNation.com recorded 380,000 monthly unique visits in August 2009 (when the site was just a directory). With its relaunch as the network’s central source for national sports news and opinion, traffic to SBNation.com climbed to 8.7 million people by January 2012 (Figure 2).
Architecturally, SBNation.com is organized much like any major national sports news organization’s website, such as ESPN.com or CNNSI.com. At the top of the page, a scoreboard updates games in each of the major professional leagues, college football, and men’s basketball. A menu bar, organized by major sports league, offers drop-down navigation to the network’s local and team-specific blogs. And a headline, photograph, and teaser for the top national news item fill much of the page “above the scroll.”

In scrolling down the remainder of the page, users find a combination of original and curated editorial content produced by SBNation.com’s full-time editors and part-time contributors. A collaborative “From Our Editors” blog runs down the left-hand side of the page. “From Our Editors” posts generally assume an “info-link-comment” structure. In other
words, the posts excerpt from, links to, and comments on content from around the network or from elsewhere on the web. Like others in the blogosphere (Lowrey & Latta, 2008), SB Nation bloggers make extensive use of this info-link-comment convention. As the network explains, SB Nation editors “update in real time the day's major stories, drawing news, commentary, and discussion from the SBNation network, from 3rd party sites, and social media” ("SBNation launches SBNation.com," 2009: para. 3).

SBNation.com offers a mix of two other types of stories: (1) longer feature articles from SB Nation editors and contributors; and (2) frequently updated “StoryStreams” about ongoing sports stories. The StoryStream application effectively turns any developing sports story—a big game, a player’s injury, or a scandal—into its own blog, with its own URL. Designed for quick updates on developing news, StoryStreams automatically populate new posts for without readers having to refresh the page (Eldon, 2012; G.L., 2011; LaVallee, 2009). SB Nation editor manages every StoryStream, but several contributors may update the stream (Bankoff, 2009a).

Complementing the SBNation.com national page are several sites dedicated to specific major professional sports leagues and big-time intercollegiate sports. These league sites (e.g., sbnation.com/nba) employ an almost identical site architecture to SBNation.com, and league editors can simultaneously publish content to national page if it has broad appeal. SB Nation’s national and league sites can operate, then, a repackagings of one another’s content for different sports consumer interests.

Where SBNation.com and the league sites each focus on national sports news, the network’s 21 “local hubs” (e.g., SB Nation Atlanta; SB Nation Detroit) specialize in news and opinion about a metro-area’s major professional sports teams and big-time college
athletic teams. A visitor to SB Nation Houston, for instance, can read about Houston’s men’s commercial professional teams—the Astros (MLB), Dynamo (MLS), Rockets (NBA), and Texans (NFL)—as well as area college football and men’s basketball teams—Rice, Texas A&M, Texas, and Houston. These local hubs have their own editorial staffs, including editors, contributors, staff writers, and other designations. In addition to StoryStreams, a blog, and feature articles, the local hubs feature a daily list of five staff-selected hyperlinks to local sports news items called the “Starting Lineup.” These hyperlinks may include content from the SB Nation network or from elsewhere on the web. Like the info-link-comment format, this aggregation of “daily links” is an increasingly common formal convention across the SB Nation network. As with SBNation.com national site, traffic growth to the network’s local hubs has also been strong. For instance, just a year after their launch, three of the network’s local sites—SB Nation Atlanta, Bay Area, and Denver—each attracted between 100,000 and 400,000 unique visitors a month throughout 2011 (Figure 3)

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5 This blog is not called “From the Editors” on the local hubs, but, instead, offers a name with local meaning. For example SB Nation Houston’s blog is “Around the Loop” and SB Nation Pittsburgh’s is “The Pitt Stop.”
Figure 3. Traffic to three SB Nation "local" sites, July 2010-March 2012. Source: www.quantcast.com

**Team-specific blogs**

Given their traffic growth, these national, league, and local sites deserve attention; however, SB Nation’s team-specific blogs represent the vast majority of the network’s more than 320 blogs. As the name suggests, each blog’s editorial content and community discussions revolve around the news and events of a specific major league team or big-time intercollegiate athletics program. Moreover, each of these team-specific blogs enjoys exclusivity in its focus on that team; SB Nation offers just one blog for each professional team and college program.

This team-specific organizational structure exemplifies important trends in the specialization and localization of an increasingly fragmented digital publishing environment (Picard, 2006). First, by publishing sports news as distinct, team-specific, brand blogs (e.g. Athletics Nation, Blazer’s Edge, and Dawg Sports), SB Nation reflects the shift in web
publishing away from general-interest publications and toward branded “verticals”—“mini-publications” that specialize in covering particular topics (Kaplan, 2011; Schonfeld, 2012). For instance, NYTimes.com publishes technology news under its branded Bits vertical, and Time.com publishes politics news as Swampland. At the same time, in focusing on individual sports teams, each with its own physical geography and fan base, SB Nation is akin to the hyperlocal news networks of Baristanet.com (in seven New Jersey towns) and AOL’s Patch venture of 800+ local news sites (Grueskin, Seave, & Graves, 2011).

To understand the offerings of these team-specific blogs, it is helpful to distinguish between the interrelated editorial and community functions of these blogs. The following describe what a reader finds upon a visit to an SB Nation team-specific blog in editorial and community terms.

**Editorial functions**

SB Nation’s team-specific blogs publish sports news and opinion about a sports team for that team’s fans. In this function, each blog has its own editorial staff and (to a greater or lesser degree) a staff hierarchy. A box at the bottom of each blog clearly identifies the blog’s editorial staff (Figure 5, under “Blog Staff”). SB Nation contracts with a managing editor or lead blogger for each of its team blogs. If one were to visit an SB Nation blog and ask, “Who runs this blog?” or “Who’s in charge here?” the answer would almost invariably be the individual in the managing editor or lead blogger’s position. He is charged with carrying out or delegating that blog’s editorial, publishing, and community management responsibilities. The remainder of the editorial staff varies from blog to blog, but most identify other writers, authors, or contributors who publish posts to the blog’s front page. Some blogs also designate individuals tasked with moderating the comment threads below each blog post.
Figure 4. Page layout for SB Nation team-specific blogs

Figure 5. Page layout for SB Nation team-specific blogs (continued).
Some of what a reader finds when visiting an SB Nation team-specific blog is consistent from visit to visit and should be considered more publishing-related than editorial. Like a newspaper’s masthead, for instance, a blog header appears prominently at the top of the site, with the publication’s name, tagline, and a logo (Figure 4, under “Blog Header”). Given SB Nation’s emphasis on team-specific branding, the franchise’s colors are incorporated into the logo and throughout the site. Down the left and right sides of the page are sidebars with various “widgets”—embeddable web applications featuring sports statistics, recent posts, polls, text, and links (Figures 4 and 5, under “Left and Right Sidebar Widgets”). Some of these widgets, like the “Fan Confidence Poll” and “Recent FanPosts” are standard on any SB Nation blog and are automatically populated with new information throughout the day. Editorial staffs do have a degree of control, though, in creating other text-based widgets such as the “Blogroll” (i.e., hyperlinks to related media), the blog’s “About” page, and widgets with community-guideline resources. Editors can also specify that some widgets regularly update certain sports data for readers, such as a team’s record, upcoming schedule, and player statistics.

The key editorial space on an SB Nation team-specific blog, though, is a center editorial column where the staff publishes its “Front Page” news and opinion (Figures 4 and 5, under “Editorial Column”). SB Nation blogs can vary widely in tone and areas of emphasis. Each has its own history, culture, community, key personalities, and relationships with local teams and other media outlets. Some blogs (and their communities) are more informational and analytical; others are more self-reflexive and snarky. Structurally, though, front-page posts on most of the network’s team-specific blogs tend to fall into one of a handful of categories: previews, recaps, feature articles, breaking news, and daily links.
Previews and recaps are produced in conjunction with a team’s games. Previews are generally published a few hours before a game, providing readers with information that bears on the contest (e.g., injuries, results of previous meetings, match-ups, storylines, predictions). After a game is over, a member of the blog’s editorial staff will recap the game, providing information about the contest (e.g., result, top performers, momentum swings) and analysis of the teams’ performance (e.g., ‘break downs’ of key plays, surprises, historical contextualization). Recaps are often posted a few hours after a game—the next morning at the latest. Readers of a traditional newspaper sports section would find SB Nation’s previews and recaps familiar.

Readers of newspaper sports pages would also be familiar with the feature articles that a blog’s editorial staff publishes on the front page. For the most part, these articles read like the work of newspaper sports columnists—bloggers reflect on the team’s performances, personalities, and prospects. Indeed, in a survey of sports bloggers (most of which were SB Nation bloggers), nearly 70% of respondents characterized their work as “commentary” ("From outside the press box," 2009).

In constructing this commentary, most SB Nation blogs clearly place a premium on analysis. What plays and line-ups have working well, and why? What trends explain a team’s performance of late? What are the team’s chances for next season? Who should the team trade for or draft, and why? These are the types of questions feature articles on SB Nation blogs often address. In answering them, they wear their hearts on their sleeves, writing from “the fan’s perspective”—or as “fans-as-columnists” (Feinstein, 2010).

SB Nation blogs publish more than analysis and opinion, though. They also publish breaking news, like trades, injuries, or line-up changes, as those developments unfold in the
sports world. What’s important, though, is that this reporting is rarely the product of traditional newsgathering. Most of the breaking news SB Nation bloggers pass along to readers is second-hand information that they’ve adapted from media outlets’ coverage (e.g., sporting event broadcasts and reporting), or from information published by sports teams and athletes. In this, most breaking news from SB Nation blogs might be called second-hand breaking news. Bloggers often publish this information for readers in the “info-link-comment” structure described above: a brief description of the news event is provided; the post links to further information about that event on the web; and the blogger often offers his analysis or commentary on the news.

A final format worth noting is the “daily links” post (or “link dump”). In these posts, bloggers aggregate a daily digest of roughly 5-10 hyperlinks to web-based media content relevant to their subject matter—the team. These links may take readers to a variety of sources and content, including news articles, blog posts, videos, statistical resources, press releases, and Twitter feeds—basically, any content that is relevant to the team, that may be of interest to readers, and that can be hyperlinked. Like the “info-link-comment” format used for breaking news, daily links posts also often include a short explanation or commentary about each piece of content that is linked to. Not every SB Nation blog publishes a daily links post, and some blogs do so weekly or intermittently; however, network blogs increasingly adopt the daily version of this format. The provision of daily links is consistent with broader news industry trends in aggregation or curation (Ingram, 2012). Indeed, according to the Pew Research Center (2012), nearly as many U.S. adults use “news organizing websites or apps” “very often” to get news on their digital devices as those that “go directly to news websites or apps.”
There is a common thread worth noting about all of these editorial post formats—previews, recaps, feature articles, breaking news, and daily links. To greater or lesser degrees, each tends to rely on some combination of the following: (1) news, information, and ideas that can be gathered via media (e.g., by watching live event broadcasts, “surfing” the web) and (2) the opinion and analysis of the blogger. Where the sports pages traditionally distinguish between the news reported by journalists and the opinion reported by columnists, SB Nation blogs make no such distinction. The network’s blogs offer a blend of traditionally distinct formats, shifting back-and-forth between (1) sports news and information and (2) the blogger’s perspective on that news and information.

**Community functions**

While the editorial functions of SB Nation’s team-specific blogs are the primary focus of this study, each blog is also a community of that team’s fans. Indeed, the term “team-specific blog” overemphasizes editorial functions; team-specific blog-community is a more accurate moniker, reflecting these blogs’ mix of editorial and community functions.

In this, SB Nation’s blog-communities are very similar to the Fan Based Internet Sports Communities (FBISCs) that Porter, Wood, and Benigni (2011) have studied. These authors liken FBISCs to a golf course’s “19th hole”—“a clubhouse, of sorts, conducive for rumination, celebration, and keeping score” (ibid: 142). Here, sports fans “galvanize” their collective affinities for their favorite teams” (ibid: 128). Similarly, SB Nation blog-communities have been called “electronic sports bar[s]” (olympicmike, 2010: para. 3) and “digital water cooler[s] for the like-minded” (Plambeck, 2010). The network’s CEO, Jim Bankoff describes the communities as a “interactive environment[s]” that are “authentically
two-way”—like “talk radio,” but with “hundreds of call-ins, if not thousands, per hour” (Behling, 2010: para. 18-19).

There are a couple key mechanisms/spaces through which SB Nation blogs function as communities. First, a blog’s community members can publish their own “FanPosts” and shorter “FanShots.” Like a managing editor’s posts, the full community can read, recommend (or “rec”), and comment on FanPosts/Shots, and these posts can also be quickly shared on social media. The main distinction between FanPosts/Shots and those of the blog’s editorial staff is that community members’ posts are not published directly to the center editorial column of the front page. This is not to say that FanPosts and FanShots are inaccessible, though. Indeed, some community members’ FanPosts/Shots generate as many comments as do posts from a blog’s editorial staff. Managing editors can also “promote” community members’ especially good FanPosts and FanShots to the front page.

The second mechanism/space through which SB Nation blogs operate as communities is in the comment threads that follow each post. Here community members respond to the ideas presented in the bloggers’ post as well as to the comments of other users. Indeed, often the editorial staff for an SB Nation blog will participate in the discussion—they, too, are part of the community. While the number of comments in a given thread is a poor metric for the degree of community within any online space (since a handful of commenters can have extended discussions), the discussion threads following posts in some SB Nation blog-communities regularly generate hundreds of comments.

A special type of comment thread, called a game thread, is the third key mechanism/space for community at SB Nation blogs. In these threads, a blog’s community engages in a discussion about a sporting event as it unfolds in real time. Presumably, most
users are commenting from their computers while watching the game on television; however, with the penetration of mobile devices in recent years, users can now discuss live sports events in SB Nation game threads from those live sports events. If SB Nation blog-communities are akin to a sports bar, then game threads reflect the fever pitch of excitement one can find in a sports bar during the home team’s game. For instance, the following is an SB Nation blogger’s description of game threads on the network’s Golden State Warriors blog—Golden State of Mind [goldenstateofmind.com]. I quote olympicmike (2010) at length as an excellent, rich description of the types of exchanges that characterize SB Nation game threads:

• **The Regulars**

Here [at Golden State of Mind (GSOM)] we are lucky to have a huge group of die-hard Warriors fans. As I type this GSoM has 6,360 members, which means on any given night there will be a good group of folks settling down to watch the game with each other in the [game thread]. You can always count on good people like IQofaWarrior, ROMESdavidWOOD37, Shells, Evanz, Reverend_Randy, and many others holding down the comments section.

• **The Pregame Chatter**

Some of the best discussions here at GSoM happen in the hours leading up to the games. You can find Warriors fans breaking down coaching rotations, defensive match-ups, last minute injury updates, and plenty of related links being shared. And don't forget the predictions. It's your chance to take a shot in the dark and hopefully earn some post game bragging rights. You can also find some (mostly) good-natured trash talking with fans of the opposing teams…
• **The Reactions**

Once the game gets rolling it's all about the fan reactions, and quick notes and observations. It's pretty fun when you watch an amazing play on your TV and then look down to see 15 simultaneous posts with lots of ALL CAPS AND EXCLAMATION POINTS!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! … Those quick observations can be pretty eye opening too. Sometimes it can be hard to pick up on all the minor details, statistical insights, and dramatic story lines while watching the games…

• **The Post-Game Celebration (or Group Therapy)**

After it's all said and done, and the final buzzer has sounded you can enjoy the victory together as Warriors fans. Oh, yeah, and for those rare occasions where the Warriors don't come away with the victory you can slide right into a group therapy session with your fellow frustrated Dubs junkies …

FanPosts, FanShots, comment threads, and game threads constitute the key community spaces in SB Nation’s blog-communities. No two SB Nation blogs are identical; distinct site histories, cultures, and key individuals all shape community dynamics in unique ways. Still, attending to SB Nation’s dual editorial and community structure provides a helpful introductory framework for making sense of the organization and offerings of SB Nation’s team-specific blogs.

**Chapter summary**

In this chapter, I described 2008 as the year when sports blogging arrived. Beyond Buzz Bissinger’s emblematic rant, and SB Nation, a network of sports blogs, also received its first major fundraising round in 2008. This blog network is discussed at length, here, to introduce it as this study’s, and, second, to provide the reader a description of the network as
a user would encounter it. This description made note of the different levels of SB Nation’s organizational structure (national, league, local, and team-specific), as well as the two main functions of the network’s team-specific sites—editorial and community.

I also argued that in certain fundamental respects, traditional sports journalism and large commercial sports blogs networks are not so different. Each employs a near-exclusive focus on the men’s commercial sports sphere, and each operates as a vehicle for corporate advertising. To understand the standard fare of SB Nation’s blogs, this chapter argued that resource allocation and bloggers’ work routines both require attention. In Chapter 2, I will expand on these ideas, developing this study’s theoretical framework.
Chapter 2: Theoretical Orientations

2.1 The Political Economy of Culture

Wealth, power, and social class

The political economy of culture\(^6\) is a theoretical perspective that seeks to understand the relationships between wealth, power, and the media and cultural systems in societies. In this, political economy of culture is not narrowly concerned with media and communication; it is also concerned with how these processes shape and are shaped by the wider social totality (Mosco, 2009). Indeed, attention to the wider social totality is one of this perspective's “central characteristics” (Mosco, 1996, 2009). As Mosco (2009: 4) explains:

The political economist asks: How are power and wealth related and how are these in turn connected to cultural and social life? The political economist of communication wants to know how all of these influence and are influenced by our system of mass media, information, and entertainment.

With respect to the relationship between wealth and power under capitalism, radical political economists observe, first, that processes of capital accumulation are centrally implicated in the asymmetrical distribution of political power and material rewards in capitalist societies. Following Marx (1978), Jhally (1989b: 67) explains that in capitalist societies like the U.S.:

Power and rewards [are] increasingly concentrated in the hands of those who own the means of production [the capitalists] at the expense of the much larger group of

\(^6\) This term often used interchangeably with the political economy of communication (comScore, 2012) (Mosco, 2009) and the political economy of media (McChesney, 2008); Porter et al. (2011).
people [the working class] who own only their labor power, which they sell in exchange for wages.

The concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the ownership class is not incidental to capitalism—it is the logic of the system. Investment capital is allocated to those businesses that (after setting aside a portion of revenue for raw materials and upkeep on machinery) can sell goods at rates that outstrip the wages paid to workers for making those goods. When this occurs, business owners and investors realize profit, which is subsequently reinvested in pursuit of more profit. What should be noted is that this is a fundamentally exploitative system. Profitability depends, in part, on the owners’ ability to compensate workers at rates that are not commensurate with the value they add to the final product. With capitalist society’s economic needs and wants increasingly satisfied through the marketplace, though, workers are left with few options for survival outside of their cooperation (and struggle) with the system (Mandel, n.d.; Sakisaka, 1967).

In the United States, the capitalist class reinforces its economic power, in part, through disproportionate direct involvement in the political process. While millionaires make up about 1% of the U.S. population, in 2010-2011 they accounted for 47% of U.S. Representatives and 67% of Senators (Beckel, 2011). Leaders of the capitalist class also work with high-level corporate executives and the directors of capitalist-supported foundations, think tanks, and policy-planning organizations to shape the political process from the outside. These “power elite” (Domhoff, 2005; Mills, 1956) exert influence in key areas, such as the tax code, corporate subsidies, and regulatory policy, through several indirect mechanisms: by lobbying policy-makers and regulators; by developing the policies to be considered by lawmakers; and by making donations to politicians' electoral campaigns.
and so-called “independent” political action committees. Importantly, political and economic processes like these are always sites of struggle—struggles between specific firms, between powerful factions within the capitalist class, and between this class and the working class. The latter struggle is shaped, importantly, by the extent to which the working class is organized and aware of its exploitation (Domhoff, 2005).

**Instrumental control of media and culture by capitalists**

In general, political economists of culture contend that, under capitalism, the media and cultural systems tend to support these wealth and power asymmetries, as well as their underlying capital accumulation process. Scholars differ, however, in their explanations for how and why media and cultural institutions tend to support the status quo (see: Jhally, 1989b; Mosco, 1996, 2009; Murdock, 1982).

Some political economists focus on capitalists’ instrumental control of media and culture as ideological tools for shaping public's awareness of and attitudes toward matters that bear on their investment or class interests. Instrumental frameworks point out that ownership in the media and cultural industries increasingly concentrates among a handful of global media conglomerates. Further, these companies operate in a dense web of ownership ties, interlocking directorates, and other business relationships with major corporations and financial institutions. They also work closely with politicians and government regulators on policy matters, and personnel moving back and forth through public and private sector revolving doors (Bagdikian, 2004; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Thornton, Walters, & Rouse, 2005).

According to Herman and Chomsky (1988) the wealthy ownership interests, and business and policy relationships of large, profit-oriented media firms operate as a “filter” on
the news content. Rather than serve the public interest, the news media function as a “propaganda” for the wealthy and powerful. So the argument goes, directors of media firms exercise power over media content by hiring and firing people in key media posts and by setting the overall direction for media firms. Directors rarely intervene in editorial decisions, since journalists and editors self-censor content that conflicts with owners' interests (Jhally, 1989b). Instrumental control can come from other sources than ownership. For-profit media’s structural tendencies toward reliance on advertising subsidy and access to official government sources add additional filters. They further narrow the range of content and voices available for public consumption. This is not a conspiracy, but rather the product of media companies pursuing profitability (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

An alternative (but complementary) political economic perspective focuses on media and culture’s two-part structural service in supporting capital accumulation processes: first, as a sphere for direct capital investment and accumulation; and, second, as indirect mechanism of accumulation for the economy more broadly through the advertising system. It is helpful first, though, to step back and take a look, historically, at these processes and their relationship to the wider social totality. Indeed, Mosco (1996, 2009) identifies social change and history as another central characteristic of the political economy of communication and culture.

**The media and “late capitalism’s” crises**

Neo-Marxian or “radical” political economists, such as Baran and Sweezy (1966) and Mandel (1972), sought to provide a history of capitalism’s development, identifying key phases in this political economic system’s maturation. Baran and Sweezy distinguished between (1) the small family firms and competitive markets of 19th Century “competitive
capitalism," and (2) the giant corporations of 20th Century "monopoly capitalism" that operated in relatively stable, uncompetitive, and highly profitable oligopolistic markets. Mandel further distinguished early 20th Century "monopoly capitalism," with its imperialist growth engine, from post-World War II "late capitalism." The latter is defined by the maturation of “consumer society” and the capitalization of the service sector.

This is not the place to sort out whether late capitalism represents any meaningful break from the monopoly era. What is worth noting, though, is that both Baran and Sweezy (1966) and Mandel (1972) understood 20th Century capitalism as a system that is constantly responding to major "crises," particularly crises of “underconsumption” and “overaccumulation.” Underconsumption refers to the tendency, under monopoly or late capitalism, for productive capacity to outstrip consumer demand. Simply put, in their profit maximization efforts and with mass production's immense productive capacity, major corporations tend to bring more goods to market than consumers are willing or able to purchase. Overaccumulation refers to the tendency for capital accumulation, in this highly productive system, to outpace the development of new profitable investment opportunities. As Foster (2000) explains:

[T]he accumulation of a mountain of surplus means that capitalist firms are faced with the problem of how to employ all of it, i.e., how to use the piled-up cash to make more profit. True, capitalists can use or waste some of this surplus for personal pleasure. But that is peanuts compared to the size of the growing surplus. So the problem remains one of how to absorb all of the surplus actually and potentially available. Generally, the answer is sought in new investment, but that expansion of
capital comes up against consumption limits imposed by the distribution of income: who will buy the increased volume of output?

Capitalism is a remarkably adaptive system, though. It has developed novel ways to address these threats while still maintaining the system’s basic structural arrangements (e.g., social class, private property, and markets). These innovations include the globalization of consumer and labor markets, strategic interventions by the State, an expansive credit system, and perpetual military spending (Harvey, 2006).

The media and cultural spheres presented two key mechanisms for addressing (though, again, never solving) the capitalism’s underconsumption and overaccumulation crises. In the first mechanism, media and culture offered attractive new spheres for investors seeking to keep their overaccumulated capital “productive.” In this sense, media and cultural industries firms are not primarily vehicles for ideology (as in the instrumental frameworks above). They function as commercial ventures capable of generating a profitable return on investment from the sale of culture (or its audiences) as a commodity. Cultural commodities do produce ideology, but this is not their primary purpose.

In the second mechanism, corporate advertisers harnessed media and culture’s capacity for broad public attention and rich socio-cultural meanings to create demand for the broader economy's goods and services, thus mitigating the underconsumption crisis. As Leiss, Kline, and Jhally (1997: 18) explain:

National consumer product advertising arose as an economic necessity as modern society progressed from a competitive to an oligopoly situation in the early [20th Century]. Its function was, and still is, to create demand among consumers to ensure that the goods produced in such large numbers by mass production are bought in
equally large numbers, so that the owners of the factories producing them can secure adequate returns on their investments.

Through advertising and other marketing communication, large corporations sought to confer culture’s symbolic meanings (e.g., youth, love, power, beauty, community, and others) on their branded products. In doing so, corporate advertisers and marketers taught consumers to want their products, to distinguish them from competitor’s brands, and to pay for those products at prices incongruous with their utility or cost of production (Goldman, 1992; Meehan, 2005). In this, manufacturers wrested power from distributors and retailers, and they erected barriers to entry for would-be competitors. Firms in the resulting oligopolies no longer produced goods on distributors’ or retailers’ terms; instead, consumers asked for their national brands by name (Norris, 1980).

“Problems” of cultural goods and manufacturing audiences for advertisers

Cultural industries firms face important “problems” in the production and consumption of media and culture as commodities. For instance, cultural products exhibit strong public good characteristics; they are rarely “used up” during consumption (e.g., a magazine), and they can be difficult to exclude others from consuming (e.g., radio broadcasts). Cultural commodities are also easy to copy—and increasingly so. These characteristics do not bode well for firms seeking to directly sell cultural commodities to consumers. Moreover, matters of cultural taste shape the production and consumption of media and culture. Media workers expect a degree of autonomy if they are to make media just distinctive enough to find an audience. And, in a process that is not wholly predictable, consumers often use culture to “says something” about themselves and their position in society. From the political economy of culture perspective (and the closely related cultural
industries perspective), a full understanding of cultural production and consumption examines how attempts to address the problems of selling culture as a commodity (e.g., public goods, ease of copy, matters of taste) shape the organization of cultural production and subsequent texts (Fitzgerald, 2012; Garnham, 2000; Hesmondhalgh, 2007).

To address these problems of cultural production, media and cultural industries firms have traditionally employed one of two business “logics.” Movie, music, and book industry firms tend to employ a “publishing logic.” They manage uncertainties in consumer tastes, by marketing large catalogs of one-off cultural goods, offsetting the large number of “flops” with a small number of profitable, mass reproduced “hits.” Since publishing firms typically sell cultural goods directly to consumers, they rely heavily on copyright regimes and other forms of artificial scarcity to restrict use only to paying customers. More relevant to this study is the “flow logic” widely employed in the newspaper, magazine, broadcasting, and online content industries. Here, content is widely and often freely distributed on a regular or continuous with the aim of attracting a large audience that can be marketed to advertisers (Fitzgerald, 2012; Garnham, 2000; Hesmondhalgh, 2007).7

These publishing and flow models are not mutually exclusive, as evidenced in the growth of pay-TV and online services (e.g., Hulu, iTunes, newspaper pay-walls) that extract revenue from some combination of subscription, advertising, and direct-to-consumer sales;8

7 Miège (1989) further distinguishes between broadcasting’s flow logic and the “written press logic” of the newspaper and magazine industries. The written press relies on the regular (rather than continuous) dissemination of content and a high level of built-in obsolescence (i.e., news). Since SB Nation produces a combination of both regular and frequent content, and it relies almost exclusively on advertising revenue, this study follows (Fitzgerald, 2012) in subsuming the written press within the flow model.

8 Lacroix and Tremblay (1997) contend that these forms constitute an increasingly common “club logic”
however, firms in flow industries tend to rely heavily—if not entirely—on revenue from corporate advertisers. Advertising sales constitute 75% of commercial newspaper revenues, and 100% of broadcast radio and television revenues (McAllister, 1996). Likewise, nine of the web’s top-10 platforms employ advertising-based business models (Fuchs, 2010). As the primary source of revenue in these sectors, corporate advertisers—rather than media consumers—are these firms’ customers. As Dallas Smythe (1981) explained, under monopoly capitalism, commercial media’s principle product is not programming, content, or ideas, since these are not bought and sold; instead, he identified audiences (or audience attention) as the media’s principle product. Commercial media companies manufactured audiences to advertisers’ size and demographic demands. They did this by offering programming as a “free lunch” (Smythe, 1981) that would attract lots of eyeballs among the advertisers’ target markets. This is a structural imperative; media outlets that do not produce the audiences demanded by advertisers will find it difficult to generate revenue from advertising sales or a return on investment for owners.

Sut Jhally’s (1989b) look at the newspaper industry is helpful in understanding the implications of this audience marketplace for advertising-based media firms and their content. He explains that advertisers “are not particularly concerned with how much it costs to run an advertisement in a newspaper, but they are concerned with whether it is a good buy” (75). Since it is cheap to print marginal copies of a newspaper, large circulation newspapers are able to sell their audience to advertisers at a lower rate per 1,000 readers (or CPM)—a key metric advertisers use to evaluate the cost-effectiveness of an advertising purchase. In other words, by reaching more readers, a newspaper can offer advertisers a more cost-effective audience buy than other papers, resulting in the larger newspaper’s capture of
the lion’s share of advertising dollars. Advertising-supported media companies, then, have a twin (and in some respects contradictory) impetus to both reach large audiences and keep costs low. These dynamics help explain a range of media industry developments, including concentration of ownership, preferences for cheap, syndicated fare, and an emphasis on entertainment over substance (Croteau & Hoynes, 2006).

Corporate advertisers are interested in more than audience size, though. As Ben Bagdikian (2004: 224) notes:

[Media companies] publicly boast of their audience size, which is a significant factor. But when they sit down at conference tables with big advertisers, they do not present simple numbers, but reams of computer printouts that show the characteristics of their audience in income, age, sex, marital status, ethnic background, social habits, residence, family structure, occupation, and buying patterns.

This focus on demographics is what Bagdikian (2004: 223) calls the “iron rule of advertising-supported media;” audience size is less important “than that they be ‘the right kind’ of people.” The reason for this is quite simple: Advertisers are willing to pay more to reach some audiences (those in their target market) than they are to reach other audiences. For instance, a corporation seeking to market lip gloss to teenage girls will pay more for advertising space adjacent to content that attracts that demographic (e.g., Teen Vogue) than elsewhere. The implication of this iron rule for advertiser-supported media outlets is that “financial success … turns on the [outlet’s] ability to deliver quality audiences—highly concentrated, homogenous audiences—in large numbers” (Lowes, 1999: 19). While the relative economic value of specific demographics varies, the advertising industry has historically valued audiences of young, white men with disposable income and the
willingness to spend it more so than women, minorities, the elderly, and the poor. These audiences are “demogenic” (McAllister, 1996) in that they include the specific consumer segments that corporate advertisers want to reach. Meehan (2005: 23) explains that, “Currently, the most demanded type of consumer is the eighteen-to-forty-nine-year-old European American male living in an upscale household that subscribes to cable.”

Advertisers’ demand for large audiences with specific demographic and consumption characteristics birthed an entire industry in monitoring and measuring the media habits of those audiences. Ratings companies, such as Nielsen, sell this data to advertisers and media companies, which employ it in purchasing and programming decisions (Meehan, 2005). Contemporary interactive media, including digital television and web-enabled devices, intensify these monitoring and measurement processes. Rather than rely on small data samples from audience diaries and phone surveys (as Nielsen had), companies now passively and directly monitor media use among large numbers of individuals. Websites gather behavioral data on the frequency and duration of users’ visits to specific web pages, their online purchase habits, and how often they click on ads. Users also generate demographic and personal data when they log in and interact during visits. Companies use these data to target content, offers, and advertising to users during future sessions. By working with third-party advertising networks and database technology companies, this behavioral and demographic monitoring informs targeted marketing as users visit other websites. Driving all this are marketers’ and advertisers’ desires to narrowly tailor commercial messages to specific consumers (or consumer segments) based on their demographics, interests, and past browsing and shopping history. In this model, then, websites allocate resources to content
and services not only to manufacture audiences for advertisers, but also to gather data about those users for future marketing efforts (Andrejevic, 2002; Turow, 2011).

**Determining factor: Resource allocation**

In both the instrumental and structural frameworks, then, resource allocation broadly determines the types of media and culture produced for public consumption. Simply put, when media owners or directors allocate capital and human resources toward the production of any given content, that content is more likely to be made and distributed to the public than content not afforded the same luxury. In the instrumental framework, the media’s “allocative controllers” (Murdock, 1982) direct resources to content production that serves their interests, that of their partners, or of the capitalist class more broadly. In the structural framework, resources are allocated to producing content that cost-effectively attracts the types of audiences advertisers want to purchase; this is the surest way to generate revenue and attract further capital investment.

These frameworks, it must be pointed out, are complementary rather than oppositional (Garnham, 2006; Murdock, 1982). In commercial media, the structural imperative to generate profit accommodates owner’s and directors’ instrumental control of content; however, it also sets limits on the range of options available to allocative controllers. Owners and directors that deviate too widely from the cost-effective sale of audiences to advertisers will find it difficult to remain profitable. A comprehensive analysis of capitalist, commercial media production, as (Murdock, 1982: 120) explains, should account for both instrumental control and structural constraint.

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9 Economic “determination” is used here in Williams’ sense of “setting limits and exerting pressures.”
A structural analysis is necessary to map the range of options open to allocative controllers and the pressures operating on them. It specifies the limit points to feasible action. But within these limits there is always a range of possibilities and the choice between them is important and does have significant effects on what gets produced and how it is presented. To explain the direction and impact of these choices however, we need an [instrumental] approach that looks in detail at the biographies and interests of key allocative personnel and traces the consequences of their decisions for the organization and output of production.

With this theoretical and methodological guidance, the following research questions are introduced.

**Research question #1**

How has SB Nation management allocated the company’s capital investment, and why? Chapter 3 sets forth a methodology for answering these questions, and Chapter 4 seeks to carry out that task. In doing so, this study remains open to both instrumental and structural explanations for SB Nation's resource allocation strategies.

Resource allocation provides a powerful explanation for making sense of the range and nature of commercial media produced for public consumption. Still, real people have to create that content, and, like the media organizations they work for, those people operate with a degree of autonomy amid structural pressures and constraints. To make sense of these processes at SB Nation, this study turns to a second theoretical framework—the social organization of newswork. With its attention to day-to-day media production practices, this theoretical orientation is better suited than the political economy of culture to provide a nuanced analysis of “blogwork.” Ultimately, however, it will be argued that, when coupled,
these theoretical perspectives offer a more powerful framework for understanding production at SB Nation.

2.2 The Social Organization of Newswork

Much of traditional newswork research has concerned itself with newswork as a selection process. Perhaps the most familiar concept from this scholarship is the newsworker’s evaluation of an event’s "newsworthiness" based on a set of criteria, known as "news values" (Hodkinson, 2011). For instance, Gatling and Ruge's (1965) seminal work identified twelve "news values," including "threshold," "unexpectedness," and "meaningfulness." The more of these news values that an event satisfied, the more likely that event was to be selected and included as news for that day. For instance, a five-alarm fire in a city close to a newspaper's readership is more likely to be considered "newsworthy" than a small, controlled burn in a distant town.

The selection of some events rather than others as news certainly deserves continued attention; however, this study approaches newswork from an expanded perspective. It is assumed, here, that news is not simply selected, but actively constructed, created, or made. This perspective on newswork is reflected in this work's title, Manufacturing Sports Blogs, as well as the seminal studies from which it draws theoretical guidance—Gaye Tuchman's (1978) Making News and Mark Fishman's (1980) Manufacturing the News. Tuchman's and Fishman's newsroom ethnographies exemplify "the social organization of newswork" perspective. To understand "news" in this perspective's terms, Berkowitz (1997: 169) explains that:

[I]t is crucial to see journalists not as journalists, but as people who have to get their work done. Similarly, a news organization needs to be considered as simply another
production facility with expectations for the quality and quantity of its workers' activities.

The social organization of newswork perspective looks at a given newswork context, identifies the pressures and constraints under which those journalists work, and then asks how journalists make their work manageable amid these pressures and constraints. To make sense of this framework, the following sections draw on the newsroom ethnographies of Mark Fishman and Gaye Tuchman. These studies are not turned to because they offer the most vivid or accurate accounts of journalism. Indeed, each is quite dated and news production has changed considerably in recent decades (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009). However, each serves as a valuable guide to the social organization of newswork as a lens on journalistic practice.

**The “economic logic” of daily quotas and deadlines**

Advertiser-supported media companies operate under a structural imperative to maximize profit through the sale of large, demogenic audiences to advertisers. News organizations have to produce a news product that will attract those audiences, and they needed to be able to do so on a regular, predictable basis (Tuchman, 1978). Further, since running a printing press is a capital-intensive process, newspapers traditionally did so only once, perhaps twice a day, depending on their size. It would have taken an unusually important event or mistake to spur a publication to “stop the presses” (Fishman, 1980).

Newspaper journalists, then, operated under daily story quotas and deadlines that emanated from the commercial pressures and technological constraints of the daily press: quotas ensured publishers and editors that enough news was produced each day to attract the attention of readers; deadlines ensured that news was gathered, written, and edited in time to
meet once- or twice-daily printing schedules. As a structural imperative, these daily deadlines and quotas were normative obligations of journalists: "Reporters ignore this mode of coverage under the implicit penalty of job transfer, demotion, or firing and of damaging their reputations as competent journalists" (Fishman, 1980: 42). These observations provide some of the more fruitful connections between the social organization of newswork and the insights by political economists of culture about the cost-effective manufacture of audiences for advertisers. As Fishman (1980: 146) explains, newswork's organizational constraints, including deadlines, story quotas, and the reliance on preformulated events “can be traced to economic considerations in the management of news organizations” and “the capitalist economy of news enterprises.”

**Routinizing newswork: The “news net” and the “beat round”**

A few important characteristics of news events confounded journalists’ efforts to produce a given number of stories under daily deadlines, though. First, there is a "glut" of occurrences in the world that are potentially worthy of a news organization's attention, some of which occur unpredictably, and nearly all occurring outside of journalists' direct observation. While news organizations and journalists purport to "cover" a city or beat, a "blanket" they are not. Tuchman (1978: 21) explained that the operative metaphor, instead, is a "news net" that "catches" information about some events, while letting through (and thus ignoring) information about other events. At traditional, commercial newspapers, the news net was built to catch “big fish”—news about events of broad public interest. News organizations deployed their journalists to "legitimated institutions" (e.g., city hall, courthouses, police stations). At these centralized locations, journalists talked to officials, consulted administrative reporting apparatuses, and observed meetings to gather information.
about news events considered relevant in light of other events competing for attention.

Further, the news net is "electronically augmented" by wire services, police and fire scanners, e-mail, and televisions and Twitter, which editors and journalists use to gather information about some events from the newsroom. The news net, then, offers centralized solutions for practical and spatial problems: gathering and reporting information about the biggest events, many of them unpredictable, across a wide territory.

Fishman's (1980) work on beat reporting augmented these ideas by putting the news net "in motion," so to speak, and by more thoroughly explicating newswork's temporal constraints. Fishman points out that journalists are not anchored throughout the day at a single, legitimated institution. Instead, much of journalistic work is organized in a "beat" structure (e.g., the justice, government, and sports beats) that brings a reporter into contact with officials and bureaucratic reporting apparatuses at a series of topically related institutions in a given day (Ludtke, 2010). For instance, a journalist on the “justice beat” would, in a single day, visit a municipality’s sheriff’s offices, jail, and courthouse (among other institutions) to learn about justice-related news events (e.g., crimes, arrests, and hearings). These institutions' reporting structures assured the journalist "stable sources which generate reliable quantities of information" that helped him file stories under deadline.

Fishman (1980: 37) suggested that the activities of these institutions unfold independent of reporters' daily production pressures: “Reporters’ work falls within both of these dimensions. They write stories under the constraints of assembly-time, while the activities and materials upon which these stories depend are made available under the constraints of event-time.”

Journalists, then, had to gear their work to these two "spheres of activity." To accomplish this, they routinized daily processes of information gathering. They talked to
officials, consult files, and sat in on meetings during the times of day when those sources could be expected to produce valuable information about events. Fishman referred to these daily routines as the “beat round”—“highly regular, carefully scheduled rounds through specific sets of agencies and organizations” (Fishman, 1980: 37).

The news net and the beat round exemplify the social organization of newswork’s theoretical framework. Tuchman (1978) and Fishman (1980) both saw newswork as a production process fraught with practical pressures and constraints: daily deadlines and quotas; a glut of dispersed, often unpredictable, events; and the independent unfolding of both newswork and the events that are its object of analysis. Fishman explains that news organizations and journalists do not come up with new ways of addressing these "practical concerns" each time that problem presents itself. Instead, news media employ time-tested industry standards (the news net and the beat system, among others) for addressing those concerns; newsworkers "rely upon the standard operating procedures of their news organization and of their profession" (Fishman, 1980: 14). It is on this basis that scholars from the social organization of newswork perspective understand "news" not merely as a selection process, but as a "practical accomplishment" (Fishman, 1997; Lester, 1975).

The discussion thus far has discussed journalism strictly in practical terms—as work that is shaped by the commercial imperatives of news companies and problems of time, space, and technology. These are not the only processes that shape journalists’ work. Importantly, journalists carry out their work with cultural notions of ideal, professional journalistic practice in mind. The following explores these cultural processes and their bearing on journalists’ work routines.
Professional ideology, journalistic authority, and ritual performance

Journalists and other media workers operate under practical pressures and constraints; however, it is important to emphasize that, compared to laborers in other sectors of the economy, media work is characterized by relative autonomy. Indeed, a degree of autonomy is of the utmost professional importance to journalists and other media workers (Hesmondhalgh, 2007). Amid (real or perceived) efforts by politicians, marketers, editors, and owners to censor and spin their work, journalists’ claims to autonomy are crucial if they, their media organizations, and their profession are to maintain credibility and legitimacy before the public (Hallin, 1985). Deuze (2005) identifies autonomy as one of professional journalism’s five “ideal-typical” values. Others include public service, objectivity, immediacy, and ethics. Deuze (2005: 446) explains that journalism’s ideal-typical values operate as a “shared occupational ideology among newsworkers which functions to self-legitimize their position in society.” Beyond the censorial attempts on their work, this self-legitimization is important to journalists because, unlike doctors or lawyers, theirs is a rather porous profession; without a formal licensure system or educational requirements, “the line between journalist and non-journalist is perpetually blurry and dynamic” (Carlson, 2007: 265). Claims to autonomy and other ideal-typical values, then, help journalists distinguish their “real journalism” from the work of other groups—like public relations and blogging. These claims reinforce the news media’s “journalistic authority”—the profession’s “credibility and legitimacy in performing the function of a surrogate witness” (Carlson, 2007: 266; see also Deuze, 2005; Schudson & Anderson, 2009; Zelizer, 1992). Claims to journalistic authority are all the more important in the new media era, as bloggers and public relations professionals produce accounts of events that compete with journalists’ reports.
So how do journalists lay claim to the ideal-typical values that underlie their profession’s story-telling authority? Zelizer (1992: 8-11) says journalists “promote themselves as credible and authoritative” through their narrative practices and through narratives about the profession and its practices. In other words, journalists write their stories and talk about their work in ways that reflect popular and professional understandings of credible, legitimate, authoritative journalism. In either case, journalists’ practices serve as the basis for (and site of struggle over) claims to journalistic authority. For instance, Tuchman (1972) pointed out that journalists employ various formal practices to lay claim to objectivity: Journalists showed in stories them pursuing conflicting accounts of an event (i.e. “both sides of the story”); they provided supplementary evidence for claims; and they used formal elements, like quotation marks and dedicated “news analysis” sections, to distinguish the “facts” of an event from subjective accounts. Tuchman (1972) described these routine practices as “strategic rituals.” Newsworkers use these practices to perform credible and legitimate journalism—to “turn themselves into professional people” (Schudson & Anderson, 2009: 90).

The strategic ritual perspective, then, sees newsworkers’ choices of newsgathering and reporting practices as primarily ideological/cultural—as performances of professional journalism’s ideal-typical values. It is worth reiterating, though, that these practices are carried out in a context of relative autonomy delimited by the structural imperatives of media organizations; independence is permitted so long as “it is exercised in a form that conforms to the requirements of their employing organizations” (Curran, 1990: 120). Indeed, practices associated with these ideal-typical values (especially objectivity and immediacy) should by
no means be seen as antithetical to the pursuit of commercial ends. As Hallin (1985: 139) explains:

The media have to attend to their own legitimacy. They must maintain the integrity of their relationship with their audience and also the integrity of their own self-image and of the social relationships that make up the profession of journalism. Maintaining these relationships requires a certain minimum of honesty.

The crux of the matter: Newswork routines

The previous sections have outlined an understanding of newsworkers’ routines from the social organization of newswork perspective. Practically, newswork routines like the beat round offer a means of accomplishing news amid organizational pressures and spatial and temporal constraints. Culturally, normative newsgathering and reporting routines function as a building block in journalists’ claims to professional credibility and legitimacy. Like the discussion of resource allocation above, these practical and cultural explanations are compatible with one another—practical pressures and constraints delimit the range of routine cultural practices available to relatively autonomous newsworkers.

Whether trying to get work done or laying claim to journalistic authority, newsworkers turn to routine work methods—the standard operating procedures of their organization and profession—to make news. These dynamics have important implications for understandings of news content. As Fishman (1980: 14) says, "News is the result of the methods newsworkers employ." And since journalists employ routine work methods, news organizations end up producing "routine news"—"the standard fare that fills the newspaper day after day" (Fishman, 1980: 15). Moreover, because these routine work methods are
industry standards, news tends to look rather similar from outlet to outlet. As Croteau, Hoynes, and Milan (2012) explain:

News accounts have a tendency to look similar because reporters all follow the same basic routines. They talk to the same people, use the same formats, observe the same basic dos and don'ts, and watch one another closely to make sure that they are not out of step with the rest of the profession. (p. 132)

In both Tuchman and Fishman's accounts, routine news tended to operate in the service of the status quo. The news net and the beat round both ensured that legitimated institutions received ample publicity and legitimacy. This was not because of any sinister arrangement, but simply because, as stable sources which generate reliable quantities of information relevant to the beat, these institutions regularly shape and are the subject of news accounts. Moreover, government and corporate officials play a crucial role in the production of the news product. As Schudson says, “One study after another comes up with essentially the same observation … the story of journalism, on a day-to-day basis, is the story of the interaction of reporters and officials” (Schudson, 1989: 271). While this opens the door for manipulating the news agenda, on a more fundamental, routine level, officials' perspectives on the world generally serves as the basis for news content.

Perhaps more importantly, these routine methods all but ensure that certain events and ideas go unreported by news organizations. Again, this is not necessarily malicious, but a by-product of journalists’ routine reliance on legitimated institutions and officials for information. You cannot report on an occurrence that you do not know about. In Dorothy Smith's (1972) terms, routine newswork methods are ideological because they serve as a "means not to know" about certain spheres of social life—those which either cannot be
learned about through an institutional structure, or those which have an institutional structure that is not deemed of adequate public interest.

**Research question #2**

What routines do SB Nation’s daily bloggers use to put together content, and why? Chapter 3 sets forth a methodology for answering these questions, and Chapter 5 seeks to carry out that task. In doing so, this study aims to remain sensitive to both practical and cultural explanations for SB Nation bloggers’ routines work methods. Based on those methods, the study also offers some explanations for the standard fare of SB Nation blogs in Chapter 6.

The above discussion has focused expressly on theories of media and culture without exploring their applicability in the new media environment, particularly that of blogging. As Deuze (2008: 199) says, “the literature in the field of journalism studies is largely informed by the standards of research, education, routines, rituals, and practices set by print journalism.”

The following discusses new media and blogging literature—as it relates to these two theories—as a means of situating the present study.

**2.3 Convergence, Prosumption, and Exploitation(?) in Web 2.0**

Henry Jenkins offers a useful frameworks for distinguishing what (if anything) is “new” about new media, or, more accurately, how new media both extend and disrupt traditional structures of media production and consumption. Jenkins describes the ongoing processes of change and continuity in the cultural industries as "convergence culture" (Jenkins, 2008; Jenkins & Deuze, 2008), and he singles out new media’s multi-media and interactive affordances in propelling these changes (see Robinson, 2011).
Multi-media

On the one hand, convergence culture denotes the convergence of once discrete forms of media, like audio, video, and text. In the contemporary multi-media environment, digitization and networked communication systems (particularly the Internet) facilitate the manipulation and delivery of each of these media (often simultaneously) through new communication technologies like the personal computer, mobile phone, and digital television. As Croteau et al. (2012: 286) say, “The Internet is unique in its ability to serve as a digital platform that enables all of these features—print, sound, still photos, and video—and do it live.” This multi-media environment affords media outlets and producers new story-telling forms and choices, spawning (among other developments) converged newsrooms and expectations that journalists be “multi-skilled” (Deuze, 2007). Multi-media convergence also incentivizes media ownership concentration by creating synergy opportunities between diverse media holdings. By sharing resources and cross-developing concepts, a media conglomerate's newspapers, television stations, and websites can cut costs and expand the reach of their content. Moreover, those media holdings can cross-promote one another's content, brands, and advertising partners (Croteau & Hoynes, 2006).

Convergence culture's multi-media dimension is important for discussions of SB Nation. Indeed, much of the content produced and consumed in the network's blog-communities involves the integration of text with hyperlinks, still photos, and embedded video. In March 2012, SB Nation demonstrated its intent to delve more into digital video when it launched a dedicated YouTube channel as part of the video platform's $100 million "partner program" for cultivating more high-quality content (Del Rey, 2012). In this, the
network blurs the lines between low-budget, primarily textual blog production and that of a multi-media company.

**Interactivity**

While multi-media is undoubtedly a major development in the media and cultural industries, convergence culture’s interactive or “participatory” characteristics are more pertinent for this study (Jenkins, 2008). First, convergence culture is interactive and participatory in that the means of cultural production and wide distribution are no longer restricted to those with a printing press or broadcast station. Anyone with an Internet-connected computer or mobile phone can now produce and distribute information and culture for anyone else with the means, interest, and awareness to access it. Power asymmetries still exist in the distribution of digital access and competencies; however, independent musicians and videographers, citizen journalists, and podcasters and bloggers of various stripes have all assumed a more participatory role in the media and cultural ecosystem.

The traditional, one-to-many model of mass media now operates alongside and in relation to a many-to-many model of "mass self-communication" (Castells, 2009: 55). As Manuel Castells (2009: 55) explains:

> It is mass communication because it can potentially reach a global audience, as in the posting of a video on YouTube, a blog with RSS links to a number of web sources, or a message to a massive e-mail list. At the same time, it is self communication because the production of the message is self-generated, the definition of potential receiver(s) is self-directed, and the retrieval of specific messages or content from the World Wide Web and electronic networks is self-selected.
Second, convergence culture is interactive and participatory in that, compared to the traditional model's one-way flow of information and ideas, convergence culture is characterized by a two-way flow between cultural producers and consumers. In this, the distinction between producer and consumer is increasingly blurred. These processes are readily apparent in the comment threads that follow much of both "mainstream" and "independent" media content on the web. In these threads, commenters are consumers of the preceding post, article, or video, and of other users' remarks on the thread. At the same time, they produce content and ideas that others (including the original media producer) consume; individuals who comment create feedback, new meanings, and social relationships.

Scholars have developed various monikers for this blurring of producer and consumer roles, including the “prosumer” (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010), “produser” (i.e., producer-user; Bruns, 2008), “coproducer” (Arvidsson, 2008) and “co-creator” (Zwick, Bonsu, & Darmody, 2008). While each term shades the process in a slightly different way, all offer an account where acts of consumption are increasingly productive in that they add value, of one form or another, to a product or service. "Prosumption" did not begin with and it is not exclusive to the Internet: we are both shoppers and clerks when we scan our own groceries; depositors and bank tellers when we use an ATM; tourists and tour guides when we take a self-guided audio tour. Nowhere is prosumption as ubiquitous, though, as it is in the Internet sites, platforms, and projects known as "web 2.0." While "web 1.0" sites (or portals) reflected the traditional mass media model of one-to-many communication, web 2.0 is "defined by the ability of users to produce content collaboratively" (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010: 19). Interactive, prosumer-based web 2.0 examples include (among many, many others):

- Flickr and YouTube, where users upload photos and videos for others to view;
• Yelp!, where consumers rate and review local businesses;
• eBay and Craigslist, where both individuals and retailers market their goods and services;
• Wikipedia, where users create and edit encyclopedia entries;
• Linux and other open-source software projects, where community-members create and maintain an always-evolving consumer product;
• Social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, where users create profiles, generate content, and network with colleagues and friends;
• and every other mainstream and independent media outlet that incorporates the ubiquitous comment thread described above.

**Social production on the commodified and non-commodified Internet.**

It should be emphasized that convergence culture is, in and of itself, neither a good nor bad development; this media environment's interactive and participatory affordances can and have been used by different groups to various ends. Benkler (2006) is particularly interested, though, in the Internet's ability to facilitate peer or "social production." This form of production operates alongside and in relation to other organizational structures more commonly recognized as economic activity, like working for a corporation, the government, or as a private contractor. Compared to these institutional structures, social production involves decentralized networks of actors who freely enter into production processes without the direction of a central organizer or the motivations of money or commands.

Like prosumption, social production can occur in a wide range of offline contexts (e.g., community gardening; academic paper exchanges); however, the Internet’s decentralized, networked structure has greatly expanded both opportunities for social
production and its importance in contemporary society (Benkler, 2006: 63). Commonly cited web examples include Wikipedia, Linux, and the Indymedia network of citizen journalists. The overlap between prosumption and social production examples on the web is not coincidental. In each case, community members collaborate in the production of a freely distributed product (e.g., encyclopedia entries, software, and independent journalism) without compensation or the direct intervention of a central administrator (Benkler & Nissenbaum, 2006; Fuchs, 2009). They volunteer their time and energy to these projects largely for what Arvidsson (2008: 332) describes as “socially recognized self-realization”—the satisfaction of excelling at a creative, productive task and being recognized by a community of peers for doing so. In the Internet's visible, networked environment, prosumers or “peer producers” have ample opportunities for this sort of recognition and self-realization. Some peer producers are also able to parlay their networked reputations into employment (Deuze, 2007: 77-78; Murdock, 2011).

Wikipedia, Linux, and Indymedia are each examples of social production where the resulting goods and services are distributed both free of charge and without selling users to advertisers as manufactured audiences. They produce use values only, and, in this, Fuchs (2009: 80) describes these projects as part of the “decommodified” of “non-commodified Internet economy." Social production is not restricted to non-profit sites, though; the for-profit firms of the "commodified Internet economy" also seek to tap into the productivity, meaningfulness, and limited labor costs of social production. As Murdock (2011: 28) explains:

In the linked and very visible arenas of action created by the Internet, participants hoping for employment, or simply wanting to express themselves and earn the respect
of their peers, are actively solicited by corporations bent on commandeering their skills and engagement.

Indeed, many of web 2.0’s most visible and successful commercial ventures, like YouTube, Yelp!, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter, rely on users’ prosumptive social production to generate revenue (Fuchs, 2009, 2010). As users post status updates, upload videos, “tag” photos, and rate, review, and “Like” brands, they voluntarily and cooperatively generate both content and marketing data about themselves for these web 2.0 companies. Through this “permanent creative activity, communication, community building and content production,” users add value to the platform or network, attracting themselves and others, each of whom is in turn sold to advertisers with greater marketing precision (Fuchs, 2009: 82).

Most of the leading firms of the commodified Internet economy operate advertising-based business models dominate (Fuchs, 2010). In the Internet’s biggest growth sector, 23 of the top-30 commercial social media sites earn significant revenue from advertising (Johnson, 2012: see infographic). Like much of traditional media (as described earlier), then, the sale of audiences to advertisers is a structural imperative. Fuchs (2009: 82) points out, though, that web 2.0 companies do not manufacture audiences (as newspapers and television companies do); instead, they manufacture and sell prosumers or produsers to advertisers by offering free platforms and services to users who voluntarily create the content and social relationships that attract them and others to the site.

**Web 2.0: Empowerment or exploitation?**

These circumstances raise an intriguing question: Are prosumers empowered or exploited by the web 2.0 companies for which they produce value? The question divides
scholars (see discussions in: Fish & Srinivasan, 2012; Kuehn, 2011; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). On the face of it, the dynamics described by Fuchs (2009, 2010) suggest that web 2.0 is, indeed, exploitative. Prosumers work for web 2.0 companies by generating content and marketing data, expanding a platform's user base, and investing the experience with affect—important for attracting advertising revenue. Most users are not paid for this work, though. Scholars (Cohen, 2008; Terranova, 2000, 2004) and the business press (Baker, 2008) acknowledge that this amounts to free labor for web 2.0 companies, who capture any profit derived from prosumers’ work. As Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010: 26) say, “From the capitalist’s point of view ... the only thing better than a low-paid worker is someone (the consumer as prosumer) who does the work for no pay at all.”

However, prosumers’ exploitation in web 2.0 is often characterized as “ambiguous” (Cohen, 2008; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). As Terranova (2004: 74) says, free labor is "simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited." Web 2.0 companies capture profits based on the free labor of prosumers. And these companies' terms of service often limit users’ control over their intellectual property and marketing profiles; however, web 2.0 celebrants point out that users enter voluntarily into these relations, rather than out of coercion. Users also receive intangible personal and social rewards associated with social production. As BusinessWeek’s Stephen Baker (2008: para. 5) explained in his article, “Will work for praise”: “Many find compensation in currencies that predate the market economy. These include winning praise from peers, earning an exalted place within a community, scoring thrills from winning, and finding satisfaction in helping others.”

Socially recognized self-realization, then, is not just seen as a creative motivation, but as free labor’s compensation. Some may also parlay the “networked reputations” they
build online into future employment opportunities (Deuze, 2007). Moreover, the web 2.0 prosumers exercise a degree of control over the production of culture that was unheard of in the top-down, traditional mass media model. In a sense, firms must relinquish this control if the experience is to remain attractive for prosumers As Zwick et al. (2008: 185) explain, “the ideological recruitment of consumers into productive co-creation relationships hinges on accommodating consumers’ needs for recognition, freedom, and agency.” The ambiguity of “free labor,” then, is captured in its name: it is free in that it is “unpaid”; and it is free in that it is “pleasureable, not imposed” (Terranova, 2004: 91).

Based on a traditional Marxist definition, Andrejevic (2009: para. 31) says that web 2.0 prosumption is not immediately exploitative in that “exploitation entails some form of coercion ... [and] exploitation occurs when there is a loss of control over our creative activity” Neither of these is necessarily the case; however, Andrejevic (2009) offers a novel way to understand web 2.0 prosumption not as direct exploitation, but as part of capitalism’s larger system of exploitative social relations under capitalism. He argues that prosumption in digital spaces gains its appeal (and, thus, profitability) within capitalism’s characteristic loss of control over one’s work and alienation from one’s community. Andrejevic says that this is most apparent when examining the ways web 2.0 companies' market their platforms as democratizing and empowering—as redress for alienating social relations:

[T]he offer of a modicum of control over productive resources as well as the promise to resuscitate extended forms of community and to challenge centralised control over collective representations all gain their appeal against the background of the depredations of industrial capitalism. (Andrejevic, 2009: para. 31)
2.4 Sports Fandom: Continua and Characteristics

While people often self-identify as sports fans or non-fans, sports fandom exists along a continuum in one sense or another—from the real fan to the bandwagon, and from the hardcore to the casual (Borer, 2009). Where someone falls on these fandom continua depends on that person’s “knowledge of, interest in, and exposure to” the team or athlete for which they cheer (Gantz, Wang, Paul, & Potter, 2006: 97). “Highly identified” or “avid” fans tend to spend more money, time, and effort consuming sports events, merchandise, and media than do other fans (DeSarbo & Madrigal, 2012; Gau, James, & Kim, 2009).

Raney (2006) explains that sports fans watch televised sports primarily for the possibility of entertainment and pleasure from cheering one’s team to victory. The more highly identified a fan is, the more pleasurable the thrill of victory. Fans are often expressive and active while watching sports events. They wear their hearts on their sleeves, “basking in reflected glory” (BIRGing) following their team’s triumphs (Cialdini et al., 1976). Olympicmike’s (2010) description of SB Nation game threads demonstrates that these processes can extend to fans’ online discussions of live games. Again, he notes fans’ exuberant, “all caps” reactions to “amazing plays,” as well as the “celebration” or “group therapy” function these threads serve following wins or losses. Fans clearly prefer to celebrate, though; 72% of FBISC users say they are more likely to post on a message board after a win than a loss (Benigni, Porter, & Wood, 2009).

Fans also watch sports to learn about their favorite teams and players, and some accumulate vast statistical knowledge and sports trivia (Raney, 2006). Fans also seek “causal attributions” for the outcomes of sports events—in other words, an explanation for why things turned out as they did. Highlight shows, sports talk radio, the sports pages, and blogs
each cater to (and stoke) sports fans’ appetites for sports information and analysis before and after games:

[Sports fans] begin early, thinking about an upcoming game, searching for information about it on the Web and in print, talking about it with their friends, and planning their schedules so as not to miss any of the action. Even after the game ends, the game continues to play an important role in the sports fan’s media diet. Sports fans watch news and recap programs and read about the outcome on the Web and in print. Unlike any other type of fan, sports fans relive the game again and again. (Gantz et al., 2006: 114)

FBISC users told Porter, Wood, and Benigni (2011) that they traffic those sites primarily for information and analysis about their favorite teams. Those sites address this demand by providing information about potential recruits and analysis of coaching decisions. Users spend considerable time consuming this content. Eighty percent of FBISC users reported at least 30 minutes of site use each day, and heavy users exhibited significantly higher levels of sports fandom.

Fans also seek and offer their own information and analysis on FBISC comment boards. Porter, Wood, and Benigni (2011) found that “Analytical” comments were most common (19%) followed by “Interest/Curious” comments (13%).

These findings underscore the point that sports media consumption and the acquisition of sports information are fundamentally social processes. As Mark Coddington (2010: para. 17) explains:

Sports are inherently social; in fact, [sports] may be the only televised content that’s more commonly watched in groups than alone. And in between those televised

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10 No other category accounted for more than 7% of comment board posts.
events, the biggest element of fandom is talking about sports with others—friends, co-workers, strangers at bars, radio call-in show hosts. It’s easy to see how ideally this translates to the web.

Umberto Eco (1983) describes this continuous phatic discussion as “sports chatter”—an endeavor he sees as the height of waste. Sports chatter does serve social functions, though. It operates as a “safe” topic for public conversation, and it provides a point of emotional bonding among men in a culture where such bonding is widely discouraged (Schwyzer, 2007); however, as Whannel (2009: 77) points out, in sports chatter, the exchange of information and analysis also functions as an “alternative masculine cultural capital.” In this system, participants often display sports knowledge in aggressive, masculine ways, masking opinions in a “facts and figures approach” that privileges those with substantial background sports knowledge and familiarity with the norms of participation. In this, sports chatter tends to exclude or discourage women from participating (N. W. Davis & Duncan, 2006: 253; see also Nylund, 2007; Schwyzer, 2007; Whannel, 2009). As Grantland’s Katie Baker explains, “I constantly see women driven away from sports because they are fed it as a zero-sum game: either you know everything about everyone or you don’t” (Carmody, 2011: para. 16).

**Sports fandom as performative prosumption**

Sports fandom is often conceptualized as a trait (e.g. team identification, loyalty) that researchers try to operationalize and measure. Others, however, conceptualize fandom as a continuous process of identity construction or a “project” (Crawford, 2004; Meân, 2011). These theorists argue that sports fans’ identities are performed, and that those performances occur, increasingly, through acts of consumption (Wenner & Jackson, 2009). Attending sporting events, buying and wearing sports merchandise, and watching mediated sports are
all consumption acts that “say something,” performatively, about one’s sports fandom. Through this “performative consumption” (Hills, 2002), people construct and reconstruct themselves as fans (Crawford, 2004).

Processes of identity construction can also occur through acts of prosumption. This is especially so in web 2.0, where prosumption often results in a new public text that can be interpreted by others. In this formulation, prosumption can be thought of as a performance that says something about the identity of the presuming individual. This is the “prosumption of identity” (J. Davis, 2012) or what might be called “performative prosumption.” Sharing a news story on Facebook, for instance, can be understood as performative prosumption—it is a practice through which one creates and recreates her identity.

This formulation is highly relevant for sports fandom in web 2.0. Taking an example from the previous section, a trait approach would see the Analytical comments on FBISC message boards as evidence of a certain level of fandom among individuals creating comments. On the other hand, a performative prosumption model would see those comments as efforts by the user to perform fandom (as its understood in that community), and to be recognized for doing so by other users. The relevance of performative prosumption for sports blogging at SB Nation should be quite clear. The network’s bloggers (often referred to as fan-bloggers) presumably construct themselves as fans, in one respect or another, through performative prosumption.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed relevant literature in four areas. First, I outlined major theorizing from the two theoretical perspectives that inform this study. Following from the assumption that resource allocation broadly shapes the range and nature of commercial media
production, I reviewed instrumental and structural explanations for media firms’ allocation strategies. From the social organization of newswork perspective, I examined the fundamental role of work routines play in determining media texts at the day-to-day level. I reviewed the work of Gaye Tuchman and Mark Fishman. Practical and cultural produces shaping those routines were both considered. The chapter then reviewed relevant literature on new media and sports fandom, with particular attention to the role of new media with respect to each. In Chapter 3, I will outline a methodology for studying sports blogs with these theoretical insights in mind.
Chapter 3: Studying Networked Sports Blogging

3.1 Epistemology and Methodology

Critical realism and dialectics

Epistemologies and methodologies are inseparable. Empiricism, for instance, holds that social reality exists “out there,” and that we can know about it through sensory observation. Empiricists, then, seek to isolate and observe facts about that social reality through a detached, scientific method. On the other hand, constructivist epistemologies argue that we actively produce our realities through everyday sense-making processes—including the act of research. Methodologically, constructivists seek to interpret a range of social texts, richly describing how people invest meaning in everyday practices (Deacon, Pickering, Golding, & Murdock, 2007).

For this research, I advance a more complex, middle position—a critical realist epistemology. In this, I see social practices as the product of underlying, often imperceptible, material and socio-cultural structures. For instance, bloggers’ practices are explored as manifestations of seemingly common sense socio-cultural structures (i.e., fans and non-fans; journalists and bloggers) carried out amid the material constraints of commercial media on the web. At the same time, critical realism does not see institutional structures like fandom, journalism/blogging, or commercial media as invariant; these structures are made possible, sustained, and (occasionally) transformed through meaningful everyday practices, like sports blogging. A critical realist epistemology, then, sees social reality as a mutually constitutive process of underlying structural constraint (both material and cultural) and everyday practices.
While this sort of account attempts a more comprehensive understanding of social processes than strictly empirical or interpretive approaches, this epistemology presents methodological challenges. Researchers must work dialectically between both theory and data and between different levels of analysis (Deacon et al., 2007; Mosco, 1996; Murdock, 1989). In other words, it is not enough to systematically observe cultural practices or to richly describe the meanings people ascribed to them; both must then be theorized in relation to underlying structural processes. As Bettig (1996: 6) explains:

The political economist moves from the realm of theory and the abstract to the realm of the specific and empirical and back again. Evidence gathered at the empirical level is seen as a surface manifestation of the structural forces that lie below.

**A critical realist, dialectical account of networked sports blogging**

I designed this project to produce just such an account of networked sports blogging. The research questions were advanced because—theoretically—resource allocation and work routines are each important processes that actively organize the production of cultural texts, including sports blogs; however, in asking why SB Nation allocates resources as it has, and why bloggers work as they do, these research questions demand that relevant data not simply be taken on face value and documented, but interpreted and theorized in relation to underlying structural processes. The political economy of communications and the social organization of newswrok offer explanatory guidance in making sense of resource allocation and work routines, respectively (see Section 2.1 and 2.2). In asking the open-ended “why” questions above, this study remains sensitive to each theory’s frameworks of structure and agency: first, that interested parties actively allocate resources in self-interested ways, but are constrained in those efforts by commercial imperatives; and, second, that media workers
adopt routines to deal with both practical and cultural pressures and constraints. Recognizing that we inhabit a dynamic, arguably transformative, period for media, Section 2.3 drew on ideas about convergence on the web, recognizing that this convergence reflects processes of both change and continuity. In other words, the political economy of communications and the social organization of newswork remain powerful perspectives, but each requires constant refining and empirical documentation, especially given contemporary media dynamism.

Attention to different explanations should not imply theoretical relativism, though. As Mosco (1996: 5) explains, critical realist approaches “remain open to specifying the nature, strength, direction, and duration of a relationship between processes.” Admittedly, I came to this project with an affinity for practical and structural explanations of cultural production that foreground commercial imperatives; however, in the following analysis, the role of economic structures is not taken for granted. The relative “fit” of any given perspective is assessed through argumentation, by presenting thorough empirical data, and by considering strength of alternative accounts. Indeed, as this project unfolded, I found it increasingly necessary to complement economic explanations for blog production with an account of the ways sports bloggers, as fans, invest meanings in their practice. The product is, hopefully, a more comprehensive (if more messy) account of networked sports blogging.

As a practical matter, I follow Comstock’s (1982) organizational framework for critical social science. His seven-step framework is admittedly “programmatic and mechanical” (Comstock, 1982: 379); however, he identifies among those steps four key phases for critical research: interpretive, empirical-analytic, critical-dialectical, and practical (Table 2). This study adopts the first three phases.
Table 2. Comstock’s Steps and Key Phases for Critical Social Science

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps</th>
<th>Key Phases</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Identify social groups or movements whose interests are progressive</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Develop an interpretive understanding of the intersubjective meanings, values, and motives held by all groups in the setting</td>
<td>Interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Study the historical development of the social conditions and the current social structures that constrain actions and shape understandings</td>
<td>Empirical-analytic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Construct models of the relationships between social conditions, intersubjective interpretations of those conditions, and participants actions</td>
<td>Critical-dialectical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Elucidate the fundamental contradictions which are developing as a result of actions based on ideologically frozen understandings: compare conditions with understandings; critique the ideology; discover immanent possibilities for action</td>
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Return to step 2


In step 1, Comstock (1982) suggests identifying specific progressive groups for study that are willing and able to act on the research findings. I agree that critical research should be for oppressed social groups like women and the working class (Harding, 1989; Marx, 1978); however, working only with recognizably oppressed or progressive groups is an undue standard that may narrow worthy topics for critical study. As Thomas (1993: 36) says, “I can think of no topic that does not raise . . . issues of injustice, social control, power, stratification, or allocation of cultural rewards and resources.” Interrogating the activities of the powerful and of those that construct accounts of the world can be every bit as progressive a project as work done with marginalized groups (Gitlin, 1978; Schiller, 1992) The key
question, instead, is whether research is created for entrenched interests or for emancipatory and democratic ends.

While these steps are useful for distinguishing the logic and goals of key critical research components, in practice they are by no means distinct or linear. Qualitative and critical research are iterative (Potter, 1996), involving “‘tacking’ back and forth between the different components of the design” (J. A. Maxwell, 2005: 22)—formulating and reformulating research questions, data collection, theoretical modeling, and analysis. With these epistemological and methodological position laid out, the following sections outline the processes used to gather data on and make sense of resource allocation and blogwork routines at SB Nation.

3.2 A “structural biography” of a sports blog network

How has SB Nation management allocated the company’s capital investment, and why? Answering these questions help explain, in a broad sense, the network’s organizational structure and the types of sports news and opinion it produces for public consumption. Following Garnham (2006) and Murdock (1982), a robust examination of commercial media’s political economy accounts for the ways owners and directors allocate resources as a form of instrumental control and how the structural imperatives of commercial media limit those options.

This study’s first line of analysis, then, is a “structural biography” of SB Nation, exploring how the company’s allocative controllers shaped its development, organization, and goals, and how the structural imperatives of operating a commercial sports blog network constrained those individuals’ actions. From an outsider’s perspective several years removed from these developments, there are clearly limitations to the construction of an account like
this. This is not to say, though, that information about allocative choices cannot be gathered and that insights cannot be gleaned about the impetuses behind strategic business decisions. For instance, the business press and trade journals have reported extensively on SB Nation (particularly since 2008), describing its organizational structure, business model, strategic choices, and venture capital investment. As the company distinguished itself as a promising start-up (i.e., one with profit potential) amid a challenging and changing commercial media environment, laudatory coverage and extensive attention followed. Pair this with an expansion of new outlets and bloggers specializing in coverage of niche industries (e.g., web publishing and sports media), and there was no shortage of news and analysis from which to construct an account of SB Nation’s organization, structure, and history.

**“Listening in” and “burrowing”**

Given the trade and business press’ tendencies toward corporate cheerleading, it is important to approach accounts of a successful start-up, like SB Nation, with a healthy dose of skepticism; nonetheless, I relied heavily on these and related resources for documenting the company’s development, including key allocative decision-making. As Bettig (1996: 6) explains, “the pages of the business press and trade journals … provide much of what we know about what occurs in the realm of business practice.” In the tradition of Herbert Schiller (1992), I “listen in” to key decision-makers’ discussions of business strategy—in other words, to understand their rationales behind allocative choices. Indeed, Tyler Bleszinski and Markos Moulitsas (SB Nation co-founders) and Jim Bankoff (CEO) conducted numerous interviews with the business and trade press, documenting and rationalizing their strategic choices in guiding the network. These interviews are largely

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11 For a discussion of Schiller’s method, see R. Maxwell (2003).
corporate public relations work, but they still offer valuable nuggets about these allocative controllers’ outlooks on the company.

While the trade and business press provided extensive information about SB Nation and its corporate decision-making, I also “burrowed” (Bettig, 2009) into a range of documentation about the company to supplement my account of SB Nation’s structure, organization, and history. Some of these resources are commonly consulted in political economy of communications research, including SB Nation’s Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) filings, its media sales kit, and investor white papers.

Private companies, such as SB Nation, pose challenges for this sort of research, though, in that they do not face the same reporting requirements public companies do. In this, private companies operate as a “black box” of sorts that impedes critical interrogation of organizational structures and operations (Bettig, 2009); however, in the course of my research I did happen upon SB Nation’s “Best Practices” documents published on the company’s Intranet. These documents lent insight into the company’s organizational structure, operational imperatives, blogger practices. Several interviewees were also quite forthright in their discussions of the company, speaking to me under conditions of confidentiality.

Other important documentary resources consulted for this study include:

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12 These best practices documents were publicly accessible through a Google search as recently as October 2011; however, these documents and the rest of the company Intranet were subsequently placed behind password protection [https://sites.google.com/a/sbnation.com].
• TechCrunch’s CrunchBase database—a crowd-edited database focusing on technology companies used to gather information about SB Nation, its board members, executives, and investors;

• the Internet Archive’s “Wayback Machine”—an archive of websites since the web’s inception used to explore SB Nation’s sites throughout the network’s history;

• and SB Nation’s company blog, BlogHuddle—a blog published by SB Nation executives for (among other things) introducing new network blogs, publicizing the network’s successes, and announcing new platform features.

Finally, some of the most fruitful (if less systematic) burrowing came from generally perusing the network’s blogs, exploring blogger profiles and community discussions, and strategically using SB Nation’s and Google’s keyword search tools to learn more about the network. Whenever information relevant to the research question was located (through any of the sites and processes discussed above), the data were saved and a brief notation made using the Evernote software application.

3.3 “Approximating” newsroom ethnography for networked sports blogging

What routines do SB Nation’s daily bloggers use to put together content, and why? Answering this question should offer explanations for SB Nation’s standard fare. Traditionally, researchers studying newswork routines employed the methods of ethnographic fieldwork. They gained access to the spaces where news was made by entering the newsroom or news van or by following journalists along the beat round. In those spaces, researchers observed (and sometimes participated in) daily news production processes, and they conducted interviews with journalists about their practices. From these data,

As Lowrey and Latta (2008: 185) note, though, the practices of bloggers “do not lend themselves easily to the techniques of media production ethnography.” For instance, observation and participant observation is most convenient in “formal organizations” where practices are “scheduled and relatively circumscribed” (Zimmerman & Weider, 1977: 479-480). Bloggers do schedule their work; however, since bloggers typically do not do so as a full-time occupation, most have to schedule their production around professional and personal commitments (Lowrey & Latta, 2008). For participants in this study, blogging often occurred late at night, early in the morning, and during whatever breaks from other commitments the blogger could find (see Chapter 5.3). Further, since bloggers often work alone and from home, observing a single individual’s processes for generating posts would presumably consist of little more than watching over the shoulder of a blogger and could create undesirable researcher effects.

Zimmerman and Weider (1977) say that adjustments to ethnographic observation methods may be necessary when the culture of interest is geographically dispersed or when the activity of interest lacks precise definition or the accessible patterns of a 9-to-5 workday. In such situations, researchers often adopt a “pared down version of ethnography,” using elements of different ethnographic techniques, either individually or in combination (Deacon et al., 2007: 7). For instance, researchers “approximate” observation by having participants maintain diaries about their day-to-day practices (Zimmerman & Weider, 1977). Diaries place a great deal of responsibility on the diarist, though, and responses may gloss over subtle, mundane processes (like work routines) that interest ethnographers.
Rather than directly observe bloggers’ practices, I conducted long interviews with each participant (customary in ethnographic research) followed by a subsequent week of short, daily telephone interviews. In the long interviews, bloggers described their conceptions of their practice. I designated the short, daily interviews, specifically, for documenting and making sense of bloggers’ work routines. In other words, short, daily interviews were an attempt to approximate observation (Zimmerman & Weider, 1977). To my knowledge, this is the first time daily telephone interviews have been used to study media workers’ practices; however, other disciplines—particularly health and wellness research—have used similar methods (Grzywacz, Almeida, & McDonald, 2002; Hoppe et al., 2000; Morrison, Leigh, & Gillmore, 1999; Neupert, Almeida, & Charles, 2007; L. E. Smith et al., 2009).

**Sampling, recruitment, and participant demographics**

To understand what routines SB Nation bloggers use and why, I conducted interviews with nine bloggers who produce content for the network on a daily (or near-daily) basis. Unlike quantitative studies, which pursue large sample sizes and statistical generalizability, critical and qualitative research often relies on smaller “purposive samples” of 5 to 20 participants strategically chosen for the rich, revealing insights they can provide about a given topic. (J. A. Maxwell, 2005). I only pursued interviews with bloggers who published content on a daily (or near-daily) basis to their blog-community’s front page. This purposive sampling approach served a couple strategic functions. First (and most importantly), daily bloggers were presumably more likely than occasional contributors to use routines to produce content; they were more likely, in other words, to inform my research question. Second, since users need special site permissions to publish to a blog’s front page, these bloggers could provide accounts of their blog’s organization and editorial process. Third, since many front
page, daily bloggers are also contracted managing editors, these interviewees could provide insight into SB Nation management’s relationship to network blogs, thus illuminating links between resource allocation and production processes. Finally, while community members’ contributions are clearly important, front-page editorial content is an SB Nation blog’s most visible public text, and much of the subsequent conversation within SB Nation communities occurs in the comment threads below these posts. In other words, lead bloggers are important, at least theoretically, in shaping public perspective about the sports world and in structuring the range of discussion within each blog community.

Working from this sampling strategy, the publicly listed e-mail addresses for daily, front-page bloggers were gathered from SB Nation’s NBA and NHL blogs, and those bloggers were subsequently sent an e-mail requesting their participation (Appendix B). Interviews were only pursued with NBA and NHL bloggers because those were the two major professional sports that were in season during the time of this study. For blogs with more than one daily blogger, an e-mail request was sent to the managing editor. In a few cases, two individuals were listed as site managers, so both individuals were contacted. In all, I sent participation requests to 27 NBA bloggers. NHL bloggers were then identified and contacted using the same process; however, by the time 8 NHL participation requests had been sent, enough responses were received to create a heavy daily interview workload, and no further participation was pursued. In all, nine SB Nation bloggers agreed to participate. Several bloggers who responded but declined to participate explained that they were interested, but “too busy” to do so. This foreshadowed findings about the pressures and constraints bloggers face.
Demographically, all nine participants for this study were Caucasian men. Three were in their 20s, four in their 30s, and two in their 40s. Five were married and four were single. Seven of nine were college graduates (or soon-to-be), and four had or were pursuing Masters or professional degrees. Occupationally, five had full-time jobs, one was a full-time student, two were currently unemployed, and one was a stay-at-home dad. In addition to his blogging, one participant had a full-time position within the SB Nation editorial hierarchy. Three reported personal yearly income between $40,000 and $60,000. Another three reported that they (or, for the stay-at-home dad, his spouse) had income in excess of $75,000.

In terms of their blogging, eight were identified on their blogs as “manager,” “managing editor,” or “editor-in-chief.” The other was a “contributing writer.” Only one blogger wrote under pseudonym at the time of this study. Nearly all (8 of 9) wrote about sports teams in top-20 media markets, and four wrote about teams in top-10 media markets. According to Quantcast, at the time of our interviews, the blogs that each participant wrote for served upwards of 10,000 unique visitors per month. Four served between 20,000 and 30,000 per month. In terms of compensation, those that were under contract with SB Nation to manage their blog-communities received a stipend of between $50 and $200 per month. Bloggers who were not under contract received no compensation, but one did earn $125 per month for contributing to the network’s local and national sites. Two bloggers declined to specifically identify their compensation for blogging, including the full-time SB Nation employee.

These data are generally consistent with the few existing demographic profiles of sports bloggers. Respondents for the blogger surveys conducted by the John Curley Center for Sports Journalism in 2009 were overwhelming white (94%) and male (91%). Most were
young (46% under 30), but 30- to 40-year-olds were also well represented (37%). Respondents were well educated; 62% had undergraduate degrees and 29% had graduate degrees. Most (64%) made at least some income from blogging, even if very small. ("From outside the press box," 2009; Hardin et al., 2012). Similarly, respondents to a 2007 Ballhype survey (n= 135) were “predominantly white males in their mid-to-late twenties” ("2007 BallHype sports blogger study," 2007: 9). Fifty percent made less than $20 per month from blogging.

**Long interviews**

Any examination of media production that does not consider how workers think about their practice is necessarily incomplete. To begin examination of bloggers’ routines, a long interview was conducted with each participant to develop accounts of bloggers’ conceptions of their practice. Long interviews are a “powerful tool” (McCracken, 1988) for both documenting lived experience and for understanding the meanings ascribed to social practices (J. A. Maxwell, 2005).

After reviewing existing literature on blogging, sports blogging, and newswork routines, an interview schedule was constructed to guide the discussions (Appendix C). This interview schedule incorporated several of McCracken’s (1988) suggestions for long interviews. Each long interview began with a series of demographics questions, and then moved into general “grand-tour questions” (p. 34-35) about interviewees’ experience as SB Nation bloggers. Topics included their background in sports blogging, the organization of their blog and its staff, the ways they monitor the sports world, their relationships with SB Nation management and their audience, and their perspectives on sports blogging and sports journalism, more broadly. For each question I drafted “planned prompts” to drill down on a
given topic if conversation stalled. While this interview schedule was important in guiding the discussion and ensuring that we touched on key areas of interest, it was, nonetheless, a loose guide for the process. I guided the conversation, allowing bloggers to elaborate and open the discussion to unexpected, but no less important aspects of their practice. When interviewees mentioned something especially intriguing, “floating prompts” (McCracken, 1988: 35) were used to elicit further elaboration. For instance: “Can you tell me more about that?” In short, I tried to negotiate between keeping the conversation “on topic” and providing the flexibility for interviewees to offer rich, emergent accounts of sports blogging, from their perspective.

**Short, daily interviews**

I conducted a week of short, daily interviews with each participant to document bloggers’ practices (Zimmerman & Weider, 1977). As for my long interviews, I used a short interview schedule to loosely guide these daily conversations (Appendix D). In these interviews I sought to generate two types of data. First, we discussed how that day’s blogging fit into the blogger’s daily life. Literally, concerns here included details like: “I went to work, then, during my lunch break, I did a little background research for my post.” For some interviewees, these accounts proved challenging to generate, a difficulty I attribute to bloggers’ greater interests in talking about their content creation practices. The second part of the interviews explored bloggers’ practices for putting together content. This was the “meat and potatoes” of our short, daily interviews. Each day, on a post-by-post basis, discussions revolved around the bloggers’ conceptualization for posts, the resources he leaned on, whether the post involved collaboration with other bloggers, how the entry served the blog’s audience, and any noteworthy form and content choices. Importantly, I constantly pressed
bloggers to discuss the *typicality* of the practices used that day and their situation within daily life: For instance, “Do you regularly research for posts on your lunch break? Is that statistical resource one that you turn to often?” Further, given this study’s concern with not just how, but *why* bloggers use the routines they do, interviewees were asked to explain even the practices they considered mundane. These short, daily interviews, then, were less a process in empirical documentation, and more of a discussion of bloggers’ practices: “What did you do today?”

Since daily interviews had not been used to study media workers’ practices, I conducted a pilot study with an acquaintance (also a sports blogger) to evaluate the process. These pilot interviews proved important in assessing this method’s strengths and limitations and making adjustments prior to the actual study. The following details some of those important considerations.

First, rather than conduct the interviews over the phone, I used the Google Voice web application and Audacity software to conduct and record each interview. These programs allowed more easy perusal of the interviewee’s blog, as needed, while talking “at” the computer. These programs also meant less devices like a phone and digital audio recorder to keep an eye on during the interviews.

Second, before each daily interview, I printed and reviewed a copy of that day’s post(s). These posts were marked up with notes on things to inquire about in the interview (e.g., “Why did you link to this article?”). This helped ensure a rich discussion on a day-to-day basis, but it also meant that discussions constantly, if tacitly, explored the textual
implications of production choices; their processes for making public texts occupied the focal point of discussion.  

Third, these daily interviews required considerable planning and flexibility on my part, as a researcher. While bloggers clearly routinize and schedule their practices (see Chapter 5.3), some had more availability in the mornings or evenings, and some days bloggers were completely unavailable or things “popped up” that necessitated rescheduling interviews. I conducted as many as six interviews in a day across several time zones. To make these processes manageable, I scheduled my interviews using Google Calendar, and I also set aside almost the entirety of my days to ensure necessary flexibility.

Fourth, at the end of each interview, I asked the blogger for a convenient time to call the next day. This was not done simply as a matter of convenience. By “nailing down” a specific time for the subsequent day’s interviews, I avoided playing phone or e-mail “tag” with interviewees. In setting up each subsequent day’s interview, I also asked whether the blogger would have published a post to the blog by that point in the day or not. I asked this to ensure that, when we did talk, the blogger would have engaged in at least some content production that we could then discuss in the interview.

Finally, I had to make a judgment call about when to terminate the daily interview process. With each blogger, we talked about their practices on as daily a basis as possible until our discussions reached a point of redundancy—when I got the impression that

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13 In a sense, this process was also a check on the limitations of self-report data; working from both bloggers’ accounts and from the text offered a means of triangulation, bolstering the trustworthiness of what bloggers’ told me about their practices.

14 In asking this, I emphasized that I was not requesting that the blogger produce any content he would not have produced otherwise.
discussions were no longer generating new insights into routines. While I had anticipated conducting interviews for a full week, for nearly every participant we needed only four to five daily interviews to reach redundancy.\textsuperscript{15} This is, itself, a reflection of the extent to which bloggers routinize their practices.

### 3.4 Data analysis

I “listened in,” “burrowed,” and conducted my battery of interviews as strategic approaches for gathering relevant empirical data on SB Nation’s structure, corporate decision-making, and its bloggers’ work routines; however, these data are mere facts if they are not interpreted and made sense of in a way that makes connections between the practices of company executives and bloggers (on the one hand) and broader structural tendencies (on the other). As Bettig (1996: 6) explains, “the topics and events described by business journalists still require interpretation as to their structural causes.” The same can be said of bloggers’ accounts of their practice.

To produce this sort of analysis, I sought to put the data I gathered in dialogue with theoretical insights from the political economy of communications, the sociology of newswork, and research and theory concerning new media and sports fandom. In doing so, I sought to evaluate the “fit” of the data I gathered in relation to these perspectives. By approaching my analysis in this way, I acknowledge that this project is, in some ways, “theoretically top-heavy” (Lather, 1992: 72). In other words, I did not pursue my analysis, as grounded theorists do, with the assumption that theoretical insights would “emerge” from the data. Instead, I approached (and gathered) the data with explicit questions and theoretical

\textsuperscript{15} Unfortunately, Phil stopped returning my phone calls after one long interview and two short, daily interviews. In having listened to my discussions with Phil, it is unclear why this was. Participants had the freedom to withdraw from the study should they wish to, though.
constructs in mind. That does not excuse me, of course, from taking measures to offer an analysis of networked sports blogging that is rigorous and “trustworthy” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). At the very least, this methodological discussion (both above and below) should offer transparency in terms of how I have “done work” on my data (in gathering, analyzing, and reporting it) in my efforts to reveal underlying structural processes.

Data analysis is, to some extent, always interwoven with data collection. In my structural biography, for instance, I used Evernote software to store relevant data concerning SB Nation’s organization and resource allocation; however, while doing so I used Evernote’s “tagging” feature to categorize the data I found. Some tags, like “demographics,” were theoretical constructs from my literature review. Others, like “tech-savvy,” were emergent. Actively tagging data forced me to try to make sense, theoretically, of what I had collected. Not everything fit my preconceptions about what I would find in studying the network. For instance, one key finding is the emphasis SB Nation placed on platform development, and, indeed, I found myself regularly tagging entries as “platform.” This observation led me, then, to further explore political economic work that reformulates the audience manufacture process for web 2.0 platforms (e.g., Cohen, 2008; Fuchs, 2009). In this manner, I moved dialectically between theory and data—looking at what I had found, trying to make sense of data through theoretical categorization, pursuing new or alternative explanations where necessary, and returning to the field/web for further data collection.

After transcribing each participant’s interview by hand with the aid of Express Scribe software Transcribing interviews is tedious, I read through each transcript and, in the margins, I used the Microsoft Word’s comment function to assign categories to segments of the text. Here, too, I used theoretical constructs from my literature review (e.g., “autonomy”),
but I also introduced new categories (e.g., “hope labor”) that demanded further theorization. In addition to working dialectically between theory and data, I also shifted my analytical gaze back and forth between what I was learning about SB Nation, as a company, and what bloggers told me about their practices. For instance, when bloggers told me that their regularity of posting was important in their being asked to join the network, those comments directed my attention to discussion in SB Nation’s best practices documents about recommendations for regular and frequent posting.

As the data “piled up,” though, I needed a system for keeping it organized and further exploring relationships between theory and data at different levels of analysis. I used Docear open-source mind-mapping software to visualize relationships between the theoretical constructs I was drawing on or developing (Figure 6).

![Figure 6. Using Docear to explore relationships between theoretical constructs.](image)

Ultimately, though, the trustworthiness of my analysis relies on my ability to construct a logical argument built on sound interpretations of the data I gathered. In the
critical and qualitative traditions, I aimed to demonstrate the soundness of my conclusions by offering accounts of SB Nation’s development and bloggers’ practices in rich historical and textual detail. In this, I cite telling examples from the data not as mere facts, but as opportunities for the reader to see the corporate decision-making and bloggers’ routines as I see them.
Chapter 4: SB Nation: A Structural Biography

This chapter offers an account of SB Nation’s development since 2003, focusing, specifically, on how network management allocated resources. Section 4.1 documents the network’s origins under co-founders Tyler Bleszinski and Marcos Moulitzas, including their strategic emphases on “empowering” fans, platform development, building a cost-effective advertising sales structure, and community building. Section 4.2 looks at the network during SB Nation’s “venture era” boom in size, traffic, and financing under CEO Jim Bankoff. This section explores the possibility that SB Nation investors and directors could allocate resources toward content creation that serves their investment interests; however, Section 4.2 and 4.3 argue that SB Nation’s resource allocation largely reflects the structural constraints under which the company operates. In light of these constraints, SB Nation has made strategic investments, mostly in the platform development, in an effort to cost-effectively manufacture large, demogenic user-communities for advertisers.

4.1: The Bleszinski-Moulitsas Era

An empowering origin story

Like religions, SB Nation has an origins story or a mythology. This is not to say that the story of SB Nation’s creation is a fabrication. Instead, this is to say that the network’s origins story is part the company’s culture; it is one of the stories SB Nation and its bloggers tell about themselves.

SB Nation’s origin story starts with one of the company’s founders, Tyler Bleszinski. Bleszinski (or “Blez”) had worked as an Orange County Register high school sports reporter, and he also wrote about the National Hockey League for other publications. He was (and remains) a devoted fan of Major League Baseball’s Oakland Athletics (or “A’s”) (Ballard,
2006; Bleszinski, 2004). In November 2003, Bleszinski started a blog about the A’s named Athletics Nation. He did so at the encouragement of friend and influential political blogger at Daily Kos—Markos Moulitsas (Singel, 2005; Slater, 2009). In his first post on Athletics Nation, Bleszinski emphasized his fandom and framed the blog as a forum for A’s fans to offer their opinions and vent their frustrations about the team:

… I truly have Oakland Athletics blood coursing through my veins. The reality is that even during the offseason, I'm thinking constantly about the A's and what they should or shouldn't be doing to help improve their current roster. This blog is dedicated to the devout following of Oakland A's fans like myself that are living out there [in] cyberspace, searching for an outlet to spout off about their team … I believe it is healthy to vent frustration publicly and the purpose of this forum will be to give your opinion of what this team should do … the purpose of this site is to bring you together because you have one thing in common … you love the A's and you have a lot to say about them. (Bleszinski, 2003: para. 1-2).

Though it is not apparent in this first post, in later interviews Bleszinski pointed to a perceived media bias against the A’s as an impetus for starting the blog and for its later success. In his eyes, the national media ignored the A’s, focusing, instead, on scandals and East Coast teams. In the Bay Area, his beef was with the major sports talk radio station, KNBR. The station ignored his A’s in favor of their rivals, the San Francisco Giants (Slater, 2009). He said, "I felt like a dog waiting for a bone every time I listened to KNBR for a snippet about the A's" (Ballard, 2006: para. 17). Bleszinski’s creation of Athletics Nation as a response to perceived media bias would become the official origins story for SB Nation. As the network’s “About SB Nation” (2010: para. 15) page explains:
SB Nation was born through the passion of a frustrated sports fan who used to be a print reporter. He felt like no traditional media outlet was covering his team the way that he wanted, which was with a passionate, authoritative voice that would also remain true to a lot of the journalistic principles. In short, professional quality, fan perspective.

These implications of biased or out-of-touch sports media institutions are part of a wider set of stories about SB Nation that position the network and its blogs as emancipatory and empowering for fans. From 2007 to 2009, for instance, the sbnation.com landing page used the slogan “of, by, and for the fans” (a play on Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address), and it described the network as “empowering fans to have a voice in the sports world” (SB Nation, 2008: under "SBN"). Indeed, SB Nation and others have often characterized the network as a grassroots, democratizing, “people-powered” organization that gives sports fans a voice (Gray, 2011; n.d.-a).

These characterizations imply that Athletics Nation and other SB Nation blogs addressed some perceived constraint on fans: a media establishment that wasn’t producing sports content about their teams; when content was produced, limitations on the types of perspectives fans could identify with; and a lack of platforms for fans’ voices and perspectives to be shared with one another. While non-sports fans and fans of marginalized, non-commercial sports might find these critiques laughable, what is important here is not whether they are accurate. Instead, what is important is the way these operate as a collection of stories SB Nation and its network of bloggers tell themselves. As Athletics Nation grew, Bleszinski attributed part of the site’s success to the frustration not just he, but his readers had with mainstream sports media:
I thought I might just be preaching to myself and no one else. But when people started showing up on my little Typepad site, I realized that there were a lot of people just as frustrated ... I was thrilled that so many people had the same perception that I did (Slater, 2009: para. 10).

There were other important factors in Athletics Nation’s early success, though. First, Bleszinski secured interviews with individuals that were of interest to A’s fans. He interviewed the A’s beat writer, for instance, as well as Michael Lewis, author of the popular book *Moneyball* about the A’s General Manager, Billy Beane. The most important interview, though, was a three-part, 10,000-word interview with Beane himself that *Sports Illustrated* described as “aggressively A’s friendly” (Ballard, 2006: para. 18).

The interview with Billy Beane, in particular, greatly enhanced Athletics Nation’s visibility and readership. In September 2004, *The San Francisco Chronicle* specifically pointed to Bleszinski’s “outstanding” interview with Beane in describing the local blog as “one of the first and the best” in the growing sports blogosphere (Slusser, 2004: para. 2). Gains in readership and attention fed off each other; Athletics Nation’s weekly page views doubled between April and June 2004, and then doubled again to more than 16,000 by October. On the heels of the Beane interview and the positive press, the site’s weekly page views skyrocketed to nearly 100,000 by December—during the team’s off-season (Blogads.com, n.d.).

Looking back on the Beane interview, Bleszinski (2011: para. 8) described the A’s General Manager as:

[A] dedicated friend who helped establish Athletics Nation as a dominant force in the baseball blogosphere. He helped lay the foundation upon which the rest of SB Nation
would be built by validating this new media approach to sports: that wearing your heart on your sleeve was not only acceptable, but was to be embraced by intelligent, innovative personalities in sports management.

**Good Kos-nections**

Tyler Bleszinski’s early success with Athletics Nation was not merely the exploitation of a (perceived) coverage vacuum or a mutually beneficial set of interviews with A’s associates, though. His relationship with Daily Kos founder, Marcos Moulitsas proved instrumental in Athletics Nation’s early success and the expansion of the SB Nation network shortly thereafter. Moulitsas had created the Daily Kos political blog in 2002 and quickly grew the site into both a prominent outpost for left-liberal voices and a vibrant community of commenters and “diarists.” Moulitsas is a big sports fan, and he recognized that sports (like politics) lent themselves to community building (Terdiman, 2005).

Moulitsas had his eye on a sports blog network, though—not a solitary A’s blog. In encouraging Bleszinski to start Athletics Nation, Moulitsas says that, “Tyler [Bleszinski] had no idea he was my guinea pig” (Terdiman, 2005: para. 9). The quick success of AN told both of them that there was a market, as Moulitsas expected, for fostering partisan sports communities. With roughly $20,000—mostly from Daily Kos—Bleszinski, Moulitsas, and three partners founded the network as SportsBlogs, Inc. on December 28, 2004 (Terdiman, 2005).

The other partners were Jerome Armstrong, Jeremy Bingham, and Rusty Foster (Armstrong, 2011), each of whom had relationships with Moulitsas and were involved with online community building. Armstrong is better known as an instrumental figure in the grassroots Internet campaign behind Howard Dean’s 2004 Presidential run and the associated
“netroots” political movement (Armstrong, Rosenberg, & Zúñiga, 2006; Frel, 2005) Foster and Bingham both worked as developers for Scoop, the content management system used by both Daily Kos and SB Nation.16 Foster and Bingham headed up SB Nation’s technical operations and Scoop platform development (Armstrong, 2011; n.d.; n.d.).

Bleszinski and Moulitsas recruited other bloggers to the network, focusing, first on team-specific baseball blogs. Although Bleszinski says that Athletics Nation was “the model” for the network’s sites to come (Slater, 2009), not every blog was cut from the same editorial mold. Where Athletics Nation focused on “sit-or-start?” questions and interviews with team associates, other network blogs emphasized the fan experience at the stadium or conveying a persona. Grant Brisbee, author of the network’s San Francisco Giants blog, McCovey Chronicles, said that he would not be the guy for interviews with the team’s general manager: "If you want to read someone who is going to find a way to compare [baseball player] Marquis Grissom to [actress] Bea Arthur, that'd be me" (Singel, 2005: para. 18). Unlike Athletics Nation, early network expansion efforts also included teams that faced no apparent shortage of media coverage (e.g., the Chicago Cubs, New York Yankees, and San Francisco Giants).

Editorially, the network’s blogs may have looked quite eclectic; however, it is worth highlighting the common organizational structure that Bleszinski and Moulitsas arranged for each new SB Nation bloggers to step into. Moulitsas’ experience with Daily Kos factored importantly in these decisions. SB Nation initially used the same platform and advertising sales infrastructure as Daily Kos, and he borrowed heavily from the political blog’s

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16 Foster was also the creator of the collaborative technology and culture website, Kuro5hin.org, and Bingham was a Kuro5hin.org administrator.
community-building orientation. These structural choices contributed to the network’s early successes in attracting both readers and new blogs to the network. They also laid the groundwork for the network’s venture era.

**Scooping the competition**

In the late-1990s and early-2000s, companies like Blogger and LiveJournal developed easy-to-use blogging platforms (or content management systems) for web users. These platforms greatly reduced blogging’s technological barriers to entry and facilitated a massive web publishing participation boom (Jensen, 2003; Welch, 2003). While blogs are often characterized as interconnected and interactive, early platforms were rather limited in their ability to facilitate online communities (Herring, Scheidt, Wright, & Bonus, 2005; Karpf, 2009). Bloggers could link to each other’s sites and posts, but a reader would still need to hop from site to site to follow the conversation about a given topic. Moreover, early versions of some platforms, such as Blogger, did not allow readers to comment in response to a post.

After Athletics Nation’s first few months on MovableType’s platform, SB Nation turned (as did Daily Kos) to Scoop—a free, open-source blogging platform developed for the participatory communities of Internet discussion boards. On a Scoop-based site, users could comment, rate, and recommend the posts they read, and even publish their own posts to the site. Moulitsas recognized that Scoop’s participatory affordances served his purposes well in fostering communities around political and sporting passions (Karpf, 2011; "Server problems," 2003; Singel, 2005; Tweney, 2007). The platform facilitated SB Nation’s popular game threads, which, by 2005, regularly generated upwards of 250 comments per game on Athletics Nation. With Scoop, users could also write and publish their own full posts called “diaries”—often described as a “blog within a blog” ("Frequently asked questions," 2008:
under question 6). These diaries were published to an SB Nation blog’s right sidebar, distinguishing them from the work of a blog’s editorial staff; however, users enjoyed essentially the same publishing tools for their diaries as lead bloggers did for their posts. Further, other users could comment in response to diaries, and they could recommend good diaries to other readers (Singel, 2005). Bleszinski (2011: para. 3) described Scoop’s diaries as “technology that brought the fan’s voice to the forefront,” and SB Nation maintained the basic diary concept with its later FanPost and FanShot formats. With its comment threads and diary tools, the Scoop platform facilitated prosumption by SB Nation community members. As the platform’s website explained:

A Scoop site can be run almost entirely by the readers. The whole life-cycle of content is reader-driven. They submit news, they choose what to post, and they can discuss what they post … The real power of Scoop is that it is almost totally collaborative ("What is Scoop?," n.d.: para. 2).

Scoop’s participatory features attracted users to SB Nation blogs, but it also drew in bloggers seeking to grow their readership and develop communities. As one blogger named Halofan described his transition from LiveJournal to SB Nation’s Scoop platform:

This is a blog upgrade. It is no mere facelift. The Halofan has gone to Halos Heaven. Here at Halos Heaven [a new SB Nation site], there will be chat features for all Angels games. In addition to this, the [SB Nation] family has a cool feature: Diaries … So we will have a lot of traffic to this site and keep the discussion focused on the Major League Baseball Angels (Halofan, 2005: para. 2-3).

Users needed to register (for free) to publish a diary or comment on an SB Nation blog. This allowed the network’s lead bloggers, such as HaloFan, to moderate their
communities by denying (or threatening to deny) participation privileges to individual community members. Each network blog developed its own community guidelines and moderation policies for these processes. In general, though, community members sent e-mail complaints to the lead blogger or designated moderators when another user violated the site’s community guidelines ("Community guidelines," n.d.). Thus, as SB Nation’s blog-communities grew, each site’s administrators leaned on members to identify problem users, trolls, and spammers that the administrators could then bar (or threaten to bar) from participating on the site.

Finally, since each network blog operated on the same Scoop platform, SB Nation’s tech team could centrally develop and roll out new features and fixes across the network’s blogs. This eliminated much of the costly, time-consuming redundancy of managing platform development on a blog-by-blog basis. As with problem users, the tech team turned to bloggers and community members to identify the technical issues to be addressed. Well after the company had moved on from Scoop, this structural logic of centralizing platform development processes remained fundamental to SB Nation’s business model (McGann, 2010).

Advertising Sales

SB Nation also centralized its advertising sales effort. Why expend time and resources selling users to advertisers on a blog-by-blog basis when those users could be centrally bought and sold? Like Daily Kos, SB Nation originally turned to Blogads.com to market its users to advertisers. Blogads functions, effectively, as a middleman between blogs seeking to sell their users and companies that want to purchase those users’ attention. SB Nation set its own weekly, monthly, and bi-monthly advertising prices for both its team-
specific blogs and across the network. Blogads monitored each site’s page views, and advertisers purchased users through the Blogads site.

Using the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine, I visited Blogads.com as it looked in 2004 and 2005. Here, advertisers learned about the size, characteristics, prices, and availability of SB Nation’s users, and made purchase decisions based on that information. These data permit a reconstruction of SB Nation’s early development as an advertiser-supported media company (both at the network and team-specific levels). Week after week, as advertisers turned to Blogads in 2004 and 2005, Athletics Nation’s users looked like an increasingly good buy (Table 3). Page views climbed exponentially, from just over 3,000 per week in April 2004 to nearly 300,000 a week at the height of the 2005 MLB season; in turn, the blog charge more per advertisement, and advertisers could more efficient purchase audiences (i.e., an advertiser’s dollar went further in reaching a blog’s users); Athletics Nation’s advertising revenue jumped from nothing in July 2004 to more than $250 per week by April 2005.

The first evidence on Blogads.com of advertisers purchasing users across the SB Nation network is in February 2005. Similar dynamics are evident: page views rose; advertising on the network’s blogs became increasingly cost efficient; and the network’s advertising revenue rose (Table 4).
Table 3. Athletics Nation Weekly Advertising Data, 2004-2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week of</th>
<th>Pageviews</th>
<th>Ad price</th>
<th>CPM</th>
<th># of ads</th>
<th>Revenue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4/15/04</td>
<td>3134</td>
<td>$15</td>
<td>$4.79</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7/16/04</td>
<td>7956</td>
<td>$20</td>
<td>$2.51</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/16/04</td>
<td>16773</td>
<td>$30</td>
<td>$1.79</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/15/05</td>
<td>104885</td>
<td>$30</td>
<td>$0.29</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>$150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/8/05</td>
<td>163850</td>
<td>$85</td>
<td>$0.52</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>$255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7/22/05</td>
<td>293323</td>
<td>$130</td>
<td>$0.44</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>$130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/29/05</td>
<td>106317</td>
<td>$130</td>
<td>$1.22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>$260</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: wayback.archive.org/web/*/http://www.blogads.com/order

Note. CPM and revenue data are not provided on Blogads.com. These figures are extrapolated from available data.

Table 4. SB Nation Weekly, Network-Level Advertising Data, 2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week of</th>
<th>Pageviews</th>
<th>Ad price</th>
<th>CPM</th>
<th># of ads</th>
<th>Revenue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>134152</td>
<td>$150</td>
<td>$1.12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>$300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/8/2005</td>
<td>210117</td>
<td>$150</td>
<td>$0.71</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>$300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/15/2005</td>
<td>360539</td>
<td>$200</td>
<td>$0.55</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>$400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/17/2005</td>
<td>427695</td>
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<td>$0.47</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>$400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/4/2005</td>
<td>348261</td>
<td>$400</td>
<td>$1.15</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>$800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/29/2005</td>
<td>310884</td>
<td>$600</td>
<td>$1.93</td>
<td>0*</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: wayback.archive.org/web/*/http://www.blogads.com/order

Note. CPM and revenue data are not provided on Blogads.com. These figures are extrapolated from available data.

\*It is unclear why, exactly, no ads were purchased for the week of 10/29/2005; however, this may have been because in 2005 most of the network’s blogs were baseball blogs, and the 2005 World Series ended on 10/26/2005. In other words, the baseball season was over by the week of 10/29/2005.

During these early months, SB Nation’s flagship site, Athletics Nation, accounted for the bulk of the network’s page views; however, as SB Nation added new blogs, and those blogs built user bases, and Athletics Nation’s share of network traffic fell. By April 2005, the network had 17 baseball blogs; a year later, SB Nation had a blog for every MLB team, and
the company began expanding to include blogs dedicated to big-time college football programs and NBA and NFL teams (Figure 7).


While SB Nation’s network of blogs grew, the success of an advertising model for networked sports blogging had its doubters. Weblogs, Inc. co-founder Jason Calacanis commended the SB Nation team for its community building; however, in 2006 he said that the company would have a hard time getting endemic advertising (Terdiman, 2006: under "Cubs fan looks for a win"). SB Nation did attract some endemic advertising during its early years in the form of sporting event ticket sales and sporting apparel e-commerce. These appeared as rather low-budget text advertisements in the columns to the left and right of each blog’s editorial content. In 2004 and 2005, in fact, Athletics Nation pitched itself to advertisers as follows: “Reach the sports apparel-buying crowd at Athletics Nation!!! AN has
a fanatic and devoted audience. You advertise here and you're reaching an affluent and intelligent demographic” (n.d.: under "Athletics Nation" on 11/24/04).

It is telling, though, that Athletics Nation discontinued pitching its apparel-buying crowd to advertisers in 2005, and that SB Nation did not lean on appeals to endemic advertisers going forward (at least publicly). Bleszinski and Moulitsas were not interested in marketing SB Nation’s team-specific audiences to the custom jersey niche; they wanted a share of major national corporations’ massive sports advertising budgets. Bleszinski thought that companies like Pepsi would “flock to SportsBlogs” to reach “a large, mostly young male audience” (Terdiman, 2006: under "Cubs fan looks for a win").

Community building

The SB Nation network and its blogs were growing fast, but the idea that a collection of fan blogs could attract advertising dollars normally dedicated to the ESPNs and Comcasts of the world may have sounded like a pipe dream. SB Nation employed a somewhat different approach than the sports media heavyweights, though, which traditionally built audiences by offering (and promoting interest in) mediated game accounts and sports news and commentary. Building audiences in this traditional, editorial sense means offering content that attracts the attention of media consumers. By offering sports news and opinion, SB Nation’s bloggers did attract eyeballs in this traditional sense; however, SB Nation’s approach was (and remains) more community-building than audience-building. By creating an online environment for discussion about teams, rather than just a place to read about teams, SB Nation’s blog-communities could both draw upon and foment fans’ allegiances and their tendencies toward performative prosumption through “sports chatter” (Eco, 1983).
As Moulitsas told *The New York Times* in 2005, “At the end of the day, our company is going to sink or swim on how well we can build community” (Terdiman, 2005: para. 8).

This community-building strategy must be situated in relation to broader trends in the deterioration of social and community ties in contemporary capitalist societies widely observed by critical theorists. “Social isolation” (alienation or estrangement) is “embedded in the social organization of the modern world. With increased isolation and atomization, much of our daily interactions are with those who are strangers to us and with whom we lack any ongoing social relationships” (Neal & Collas, 2000: 114). As a telling empirical example, Putnam (2000) notes that in bowling alleys across America, more people are “bowling alone” and fewer participate in leagues than ever before.

In this context, Bleszinski and Moulitsas premised the network’s community-building strategy on a “basic, human motivation”: “People want to belong to a community.” As the network’s “Community Building Best Practices” document explains:

People are generally happier, more motivated, and have more meaning, purpose, and direction in their lives when they feel like they’re connected to something bigger than themselves … Each person will register and deal with this need differently, but it exists in all of us … Sports is one of those “bigger than themselves” things that people connect to. (Deckard, 2009: 1-2)

Indeed, SB Nation’s founders recognized that sports lent itself uniquely to community building. Sports, in general, is a “safe topic” that offers people “a point of connection” (Deckard, 2009: 1; Terdiman, 2005). Unlike religion, it is socially acceptable to talk publicly about sports, even with people you don’t know. Again, from the network’s “Community Building Best Practices” document:
Politics divide. Economics divide. Religion divides. All have been shunted off into the private sphere in our society. Sports and other forms of entertainment (for better or worse) unite because they are considered safe topics. What do we talk about in public nowadays? What was on TV last night or how our local sports team is faring. (Deckard, 2009: 1-2)

Bleszinski and Moulitsas didn’t organize the network around sports (generally) or sport-specific “verticals” (e.g., one site for the NFL, the MLB, etc.). Rather, the network’s founders build its blogs around individual teams from the men’s commercial sports world. This choice was premised on the idea that, in sports, fandom and its attendant “chatter” are grounded in allegiances toward sports teams. As the “About SB Nation” page explains:

Sports fans are generally not fans of sports—they are fans of individual teams. Unlike other sports media companies, we don't clump all sports fans onto one brand platform; doing so would water down the fan experience and conversation. (SB Nation, n.d.-a: under "Pro quality. Fan Perspective")

Beyond building a “safe” space for public conversation and community, with its team-specific structure SB Nation aimed to productively harness sports fans’ intense team allegiances. In this, Moulitsas compared SB Nation’s communities to those of his left-liberal political blog, Daily Kos: “It’s that intense partisanship and team loyalty that are really, really similar” (Terdiman, 2006: para. 3) As at Daily Kos, Moulitsas presumed that a network of sports bloggers could tap into the productivity of fans’ passions; SB Nation aimed to draw on and further foster fans’ inclination toward sports chatter. As Moulitsas explained, “I've realized blogs are most effective when talking to partisan audiences. What we have in
the sports world, like in the political world, is people want to be heard, they want to give their opinion” (Singel, 2005: para. 8).

SB Nation did not organize its content around just any teams and fan communities, though. The network acquired and built blogs specifically for fans of men’s commercial sports—the major leagues and big-time college sports programs. In doing so, SB Nation extended traditional media’s assumptions about the public appeal of men’s commercial sports to its online community-building efforts. Whereas SB Nation ended up creating or acquiring blog-communities for each men’s major league team, the network has yet to dedicate a blog/community to a specific professional women’s team. Indeed, SB Nation’s community building logic might be better characterized as follows: “Sports fans are generally not fans of sports—they are fans of individual [men’s commercial] teams.”

The network also conceptualized the sports chatter it aimed to facilitate and foment as a set of masculine practices—an opportunity for a team’s fans to deploy skills and knowledge as a form of “masculine cultural capital” (Whannel, 2009: 76). As the network’s best practices documents explain, when bloggers “know how to build community” they can create communities as dedicated as those for The Oprah Winfrey Show and The Ellen DeGeneres Show, but with a hypermasculine dynamic.

[Ellen DeGeneres] makes people at ease. She invites them in. She makes them feel like they're right alongside her. Through her they touch a fantasy life that's basically one big slumber party with interesting visitors … Inject a gallon of testosterone into that and replace “slumber party” with “sporting event” and you've got some idea of how people will feel about you if you can manage these things with your community (Deckard, 2009: 2).
**Section Summary: The Bleszinski-Moulitsas Era**

Much of the discourse surrounding SB Nation’s genesis and growth attributes the network’s success to its “empowering,” “grassroots” approach—one that recognized the plight of the fan and gave him the tools to take an active role in the sports world. This is an important story the network and its bloggers tell about themselves; however, from the beginning, the goal was to market those “empowered” fans to national advertisers. By leaning on their experiences and technological resources from online political community building, network executives complemented a team-specific organizational structure with platform features that could tap the productivity of (masculine) fan passions. In this, SB Nation became a network bloggers wanted to join. As the network expanded, its users became a more and more cost-effective buy for advertisers. In looking back at the network’s early blogs, the site design and small text ads may seem somewhat crude and amateurish; however, structurally, the company was building a business model that was attractive to the investment community.

4.2 SB Nation’s Venture Era

A “next generation publishing platform”

While the SB Nation network was growing—in terms of blogs, traffic, advertising sales, and visibility—a problem emerged around the Scoop platform. The problem, in fact, was that by mid-2006 the coding community responsible for Scoop had stopped developing the platform. It was a dead, or at least dying, content management system (Armstrong, 2011; Koo, 2011). Websites could still continue to use the Scoop software, and they could continue to customize the software for themselves, as Daily Kos did until 2011 (kos, 2011; Sardoynx,
2009); however, sites could no longer depend on the Scoop development community for new updates ("Current Scoop feature work," n.d.).

In mid-2006, SB Nation co-founder and “netroots” activist Jerome Armstrong was putting together a tech team for Virginia Governor Mark Warner’s anticipated run for president. Trei Brundrett, Michael Lovitt, and Pablo Mercado led the team—developers and principals for the Austin, Texas, software design company, Handwire. The Handwire team had experience in large scale Internet services for political campaigns and major corporations, such as Microsoft, XBOX, and Shell Oil (Armstrong, 2011; Handwire, n.d.; "Trei Brundrett," n.d.: para. 2). The group also wore with Ruby on Rails, an emerging open-source framework for developing web applications. In “late 2006-early 2007,” after Warner decided not to run for president, SB Nation made an offer to the Handwire team to develop and maintain a proprietary platform for the network. Jerome Armstrong, Markos Moulitsas, and three others17 put together “about $250K” in funding for the new tech team to build the platform over the next six months (Armstrong, 2011: in jerome.armstrong’s first comment).

The $250,000 in funding touched off a long-term platform investment and development strategy that would see SB Nation transform its network of independent sports blogs into a high profile digital publishing company (Roberts, 2012). As Bloguin’s Ben Koo (2011) explains, there are three areas where a blog network can invest: (1) content/editorial talent, (2) advertising sales, and (3) platform development. In subsequent years, SB Nation did bring on star editorial talent, such as former ESPN baseball writer Rob Neyer, and it invested in acquisitions of other successful blogs (Neyer, 2011; Siegler, 2010). It also built its own advertising sales team, headed by one of college sports’ top marketing

17 Unidentified.
administrators, Kyle Ragsdale ("Kyle Ragsdale," n.d.); however, the company’s central preoccupation has been in building on its proprietary publishing platform, which users, bloggers, advertisers, and investors have all flocked to. As Bloguin’s Ben Koo explains:

They hit a home-run on the platform, the publishers loved it, more funding came, Jim Bankoff came in as CEO, and that seems to be sequence of events of how a bootstrapped company with no proprietary technology became the juggernaut it is now … Yes their platform and design has continued to evolve, but a huge chunk of their success can be traced back to that early decision [to invest in its own platform] (2011: para. 37, 40).

SB Nation’s employed a “development loop” between platform developers and the network’s bloggers. This loop operated, in essence, as a form of co-production. The SB Nation tech team leaned on its bloggers and users to identify the tools and features they wanted and to subsequently test and refine those offerings. For instance, the tech team built the StoryStreams feature at sports editors’ request (Eldon, 2012). In 2012, the company named its platform “Chorus” (Eldon, 2012).

SB Nation undoubtedly steered this collaborative process, and various aspects of Chorus reflect the company’s interest in cost-effectively manufacturing user-communities for advertisers. For instance, the SB Nation editorial hierarchy has tools for assigning stories to the network’s national, league, and local contributors. Chorus also provided bloggers with an analytics dashboard that shows them page views. Bloggers receive suggestions, based on past traffic and Google trends, about the optimal dates and times to publish specific stories (Eldon, 2012).
Like its tools for the editorial staff, Chorus allows the company’s advertising team to efficiently manage advertising campaigns across the network’s blogs. The team has a back-end “Campaigns” tool to “create ad campaigns, run them in [the] network, track and monitor and report against them in valuable ways.” Indeed, Chorus was build for the new media marketing logic of monitoring and measuring user behavior. The editorial staff uses the data to inform its publishing strategies, while the advertising team uses the data to market audiences to advertisers. As Product and Technology VP Trei Brundrett explains, “The core idea is that all the aspects of our platform that are valuable for publishing are valuable for brands” Brundrett (2012: para. 8).

Most importantly, though, the Chorus platform made it easy and efficient for bloggers to create professional-quality content and to build and manage their blog communities. Adding pictures, managing tags, and other non-writing tasks can take up much of a bloggers time. And since most blog in their free time, bloggers cite personal and professional time constraints as one of their biggest challenges (Section 5.3). The Chorus editorial tools were built to make professional-quality publishing as easy and efficient as possible. For instance, player names and other important words in a post automatically generating tags for those terms. Chorus also provides bloggers a tool with relevant licensed photos that can be quickly cropped and dropped into a post. Social sharing options are integrated into the publishing tools (Eldon, 2012: 23).

The key point here is this: In making professional-quality publishing easy and efficient, the Chorus platform provided SB Nation management with a superior marketing tool for attracting bloggers and users to the network. Thus, while Koo says that blog networks have three possible areas to invest—editorial, advertising, and platform—SB
Nation’s keen platform investments indirectly bolstered its editorial offerings and advertising sales efforts: with its slick new platform, SB Nation rapidly expanded its editorial offerings through network expansion; and with its expanded and measured user base, it could more cost-efficiently manufacture user-communities for advertisers.

Investment in a proprietary platform creates its own set of constraints for an online publisher, though. SB Nation’s platform—impressive as it was—cost money. Moreover, it would continue to cost money to maintain and improve. Koo (2011: para. 50) explains:

> [I]f you do build [a proprietary platform] from scratch, you're not making a short term decision but potentially almost even a lifelong decision. You're going to need technology expertise for this platform as long as you have content on it and being created on it. You're not going to build a car from scratch and then let the mechanics go. You NEED them and you need them for a long time.

Technology costs, for instance, were at least partially responsible for the Most Valuable Network (MVN) of blogs folding in 2009. Former MVN blogger Anthony Brown (2011: para. 9) says the network “got it early” but was undone by technology costs:

> They reached for new value by focusing on content, developing a passionate core of unpaid yet hopeful writers to develop localized sites to get at that unique reader experience. But MVN was [a] family venture. The cost of technology overwhelmed the incoming revenue to pay for it. Grass roots don't work in this world.

SB Nation’s slick new proprietary platform, then, both facilitated and necessitated further capital investment. SB Nation’s three financing rounds between 2008 and 2010—$23.5 million in total—speak to the type of money it would need and to the value investors ascribed to the network’s platform. As Bleacher Report director and Oak Investments partner
Fred Harman said of the independent online sports space: “This is a high-stakes, high-capital game” (Fisher, 2011b: para. 7). To understand how SB Nation secured this financing, though, a closer look at the key figure in the network’s “venture era” is necessary—SB Nation CEO and former AOL executive Jim Bankoff.

**Jim Bankoff open doors**

In addition to the Handwire tech team, Mark Warner’s premature presidential campaign also brought AOL executive Jim Bankoff “into the mix via networking” (Armstrong, 2011: para. 1) Bankoff is “well-regarded” (Swisher, 2009) in media, technology, and venture capital circles, where he has “warm relationships” (Koo, 2010) by virtue of his years at AOL. After leaving AOL in December 2006, Bankoff joined SB Nation as an advisor, and, with the new platform in the works, began pursing the company’s first major venture capital round. For a company seeking financing, the former AOL executive had the background and contacts SB Nation needed.

As a business student at Wharton, Bankoff interned under AOL executive Ted Leonsis, and, after graduating, he joined the company full-time in 1996 (Schuler, n.d.). AOL was in the process of becoming the world’s leading Internet service provider (ISP). It offered popular, simplified dial-up access at a monthly fee, and it acquired other leading Internet companies, including Netscape (browser and web properties) and CompuServe (a major ISP competitor). In 2001, with more than 20 million subscribers and a surging, dot-com era stock price, AOL acquired the much larger cable and content giant, Time Warner, in North America’s largest corporate merger ever (Institute of Mergers Acquisitions and Alliances, 2012). The combined AOL Time Warner promised to be a media juggernaut, with AOL’s
online reach and Time Warner’s established media brands synergistically supporting one another (Arango, 2010; Bettig & Hall, 2012; Croteau & Hoynes, 2006).

Immediately after the January 2001 merger, Bankoff relocated from Washington, D.C. to California to manage Netscape. He later described this as “a good career move,” that “exposed [him] to the innovation and the brilliance of a lot of the folks in Silicon Valley” (Schuler, n.d.: para. 17). Netscape had dominated the 1990s Internet browser business; however, by the time AOL purchased the company for $9 billion in 1998, Microsoft’s Internet Explorer browser (standard on the Windows operating system) was rapidly eating into Netscape’s market share (Becker, 2003). Ceding the one-sided browser war to Microsoft, Bankoff announced plans to transform Netscape from a browser business to a synergistic online hub for AOL Time Warner’s wide-ranging content and services18 ("Netscape: We're not just a browser anymore," 2001). He pursued cross-promotion on the site for Time Warner’s music and magazines, and Netscape created a common, branded toolbar for the conglomerate’s web properties that linked to AOL’s e-mail and Instant Messenger services (Graser, 2001; A. Klein, 2001). In August 2001, with the merged company’s cost-cutting and synergy pursuits in full swing, Bankoff was appointed head of the new AOL Web Properties Group and charged with integrating Netscape, CompuServe,

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18 The Netscape-Internet Explorer browser war ended with a 2003 settlement between AOL and Microsoft, with Netscape’s browser development disbanded shortly thereafter (Fitzgerald, 2012). In their efforts to produce content as fans, for fans, SB Nation bloggers do face pressures and constraints. Since most have to work day jobs to support themselves, blogging competes for time with personal and professional obligations. Bloggers employ work routines that help them negotiate the temporal discontinuities between their production processes (assembly-time), that of the sports world (event-time), and that of their readers (audience-time). Specifically, participants noted strategies for dividing labor, scheduling their blogging, and using news aggregators to monitor the sports world.

All was not well for the new AOL Time Warner, though. High-speed broadband providers and low-cost dial-up alternatives ate into AOL’s core ISP business. The dot-com bubble’s burst also diminished AOL’s advertising revenue, since dot-com companies constituted much of the day’s online advertising. Advertising revenue fell more than 30% at AOL in 2002, and it would have fallen further if not for Time Warner’s movie and magazine advertising (Kirkpatrick & Carr, 2002). The company recorded historic losses, laid off thousands, sold properties amid massive debt, and saw wave after wave of executive turmoil and turnover. In 2003, Time Warner dropped “AOL” from the parent company’s name, and the merger became known as one of the worst deals in history (Arango, 2010; Bettig & Hall, 2012; Croteau & Hoynes, 2006)

Bankoff stayed with AOL, working his way up to Executive Vice President of Programming and Products in Ted Leonsis’ Audience Business Unit. Distinct from AOL’s dial-up ISP business, the Audience Business Unit sought to grow and monetize audiences for AOL’s online sites and services (Schuler, n.d.). In 2005 and 2006, with the company’s outdated dial-up business losing more than a million subscribers a year, Bankoff and CEO Jim Miller transitioned the company toward a free, advertising supported model—a belated move given Google, Yahoo!, and Microsoft’s successes. They started with AOL.com and then eliminated subscription fees for other (non dial-up) services, such as e-mail and security tools (Hansell & Fabrikant, 2005; Morrisey, 2005; Newcomb, 2006). Further, Bankoff developed or acquired a series of high-traffic niche editorial outfits, most notably the TMZ celebrity news site and a technology blog named Engadget (Carr, 2006, 2011). He also built
out AOL’s stable of blogs, acquiring the low-cost, but respectably trafficked Weblogs, Inc. network, and purchasing the Blogsmith platform on which AOL’s blogs were run (E. Brown, 2006; Kramer, 2006)

AOL was several years late in adopting its free, advertiser-supported model, and the transition came at the cost of more than 5,000 jobs, mostly in subscription marketing and customer service. The company’s advertising revenue did grow 41% in 2006, exceeding the industry average; however, Ted Leonsis stepped down as AOL Vice Chairman in September, taking a role as an emeritus board member. Time Warner unexpectedly fired AOL chief Jon Miller in November, and Bankoff resigned the next month. AOL’s advertising revenue growth dropped precipitously in the months and years following these departures, regularly recording figures well below the industry average (Goo, 2006; Perez, 2006, 2009; Yarow & Angelova, 2010).

Bankoff took two advisory positions after leaving AOL—one with SB Nation and the other with Providence Equity Partners, a media and communications-focused private equity and venture capital firm. At Providence he was tasked with advising for online and digital media investments. Upon securing the blog network’s first major financing round in October, Bankoff took over as SB Nation CEO. The Handwire tech team’s work on the initial platform was undoubtedly a strong selling point in securing the $5 million round; however, Bankoff’s digital media experience and connections should not go overlooked. Executives from Providence Equity were among the investors in this early round, as was Bankoff’s long-time boss, Ted Leonsis. Though no other direct relationships between Bankoff and investors were noted, his time in Silicon Valley and his years at AOL presumably helped in assembling

At the very least, Bankoff knew what Silicon Valley media and tech investors were looking for in a web start-up like SB Nation. Indeed, Bankoff’s talking points about SB Nation—that it was local, social, and mobile/real-time—match up precisely with the characteristics Accel Partners was looking for in social web companies (Braccia & Efrusy, 2009). The firm was involved in each of the SB Nation’s three major fundraising rounds between 2008 and 2010.

Bankoff’s connections and experience were all the more important given the venture capital industry’s contraction just as SB Nation was looking for funding. As a function of the normal boom-and-bust cycle, a rise in international investors, and the “great recession,” the venture capital industry lost more than 20% of its firms between the mid-2000s and 2010. Further, between 2007 and 2010, the number of new venture capital funds in a given year fell by 45%, and the total capital raised by those funds fell by more than 70% (Tam & Ante, 2011; Weber, 2010). At the same time, the industry’s most powerful firms19 were able to aggregate the lion’s share of available capital,20 intensifying their influence over the types of start-ups (like SB Nation) that got funded. This left one institutional investor to described the venture market as “a have and have-not market” (Tam & Ante, 2011: para. 3).

19 Including firms like Sequoia Capital, Greylock Partners, Kleiner Perkins, Union Square Ventures, and SB Nation investor, Accel Partners

20 Industry-wide, new funds raised a total of $11.6 billion in 2010—down from nearly $40 billion in 2007; however, that capital was concentrated among the largest firms. Kleiner Perkins, for instance, raised a $1 billion Digital Growth Fund and Accel set a 2011 fundraising target of more than $2 billion (Becker, 2003; Hansen, 2003).
At the October 2008 EconSports panel where Bankoff announced SB Nation’s $5 million fundraising round, digital sports media executives spoke about the challenges they would face in securing further venture investment during the economic crisis (Andrews, 2008; "Top execs talk," 2008). Bankoff said that “good business plans” could get funding, but that, “There’s just going to be more scrutiny” (Andrews, 2008: para. 3). What constituted a good business plan? Sports Illustrated Digital president Jeff Price explained to the panel, “Start-ups are going to have to focus on being lean, mean and ultimately getting to profitability” (Andrews, 2008: para. 4). Bankoff noted that tough times in the newspaper industry meant that there would be opportunities for digital publishers that could license or crowd-source content. With its lean labor model and cost-efficient advertising structure, SB Nation was in the process of building just the type of company Pierce and Bankoff expected to secure funding going forward.

SB Nation used its 2008 investment “grow like gangbusters” in terms of the network’s size, traffic, and revenue (Swisher, 2009: para. 6). Each, in turn, made SB Nation an increasingly attractive investment opportunity (Fisher, 2011b). As is true in so many other industry sectors, capital investment and market share begot one another in the digital sports space. Bankoff and SB Nation would complete B and C series fundraising rounds of $8 million and $10.5 million, respectively (Ali, 2009; Kramer, 2010). In all, Bankoff successfully raised $23.5 million for SB Nation between 2008 and 2010 (Table 5).
Table 5. SB Nation’s Reported Fundraising Rounds, 2008-2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Raised</td>
<td>$5 million</td>
<td>$8 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investors</td>
<td>*Accel Partners</td>
<td>*Comcast Interactive Capital (CIC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*Allen &amp; Co.</td>
<td>*Accel Partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*Ted Leonsis</td>
<td>*Allen &amp; Co.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*Dan Rosensweig</td>
<td>*Ted Leonsis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*Jeff Weiner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*Brent Jones</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*Chris Schroeder</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*Providence Equity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Partners exec</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SB Nation valuation</td>
<td>~$30 million</td>
<td>$60-$90 million</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


Note. Lead investor for each round in italics.

Following Murdock (1982) it is important to explore whether SB Nation’s investors have discernible instrumental interests in SB Nation operations and content over and above the search for a return on investment. The next sections carry out this exercise by examining SB Nation’s relationship to two key financiers: Former AOL chairman and Washington area-sports mogul, Ted Leonsis; and Comcast Interactive Capital, the venture investment arm for the cable, Internet, and sports media giant. SB Nation’s operations and content offer potential strategic advantages in advancing these investors’ other sports and sports media holdings.

**Ted Leonsis: Sports media control or amplification? Or neither?**

As an owner of three Washington, D.C. professional sports franchises (Table 6), Leonsis—like all sports owners—has an interest in both minimizing “bad press” and in facilitating “news-as-publicity” (Lowes, 1999).
**Table 6: SB Nation Investors’ Sports and Sports Media Holdings and Relationships**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Investor (Group)</th>
<th>Funding Round</th>
<th>Holdings &amp; Relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accel Partners</td>
<td>A, B, C</td>
<td>*Partner and lead investor, Jim Breyer: minority owner, Boston Celtics (NBA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comcast Interactive Capital</td>
<td>B, C</td>
<td><strong>TV Networks</strong>&lt;br&gt;*NBC&lt;br&gt;*NBC Sports Network&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;&lt;br&gt;*Golf Channel&lt;br&gt;*Universal Sports&lt;br&gt;*Universal HD&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jones, Brent</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>*Director, San Jose Sharks (NHL)&lt;br&gt;*Former player, San Francisco 49ers (NFL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Dir., Northgate Capital)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leonsis, Ted</td>
<td>A, B</td>
<td>Majority owner, through MS&amp;E:&lt;br&gt;*Washington Capitals (NHL)&lt;br&gt;*Washington Wizards (NBA)&lt;br&gt;*Washington Mystics (WNBA)&lt;br&gt;*Verizon Center, Washington, D.C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Owner, chair, &amp; CEO,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monumental Sports &amp;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment Group)</td>
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</table>


<sup>a</sup> Formerly Versus.

In sports, an organization’s primary means of minimizing bad press is its ability to restrict (or merely threaten to restrict) press access to the organization or its athletes (Lowes, 1999). When a sports team owns a media outlet, the ability to hire and fire editorial staff can also operate as a mechanism of control. Leonsis’ two rounds of investment in SB Nation would seem to create challenges, or at least “no go areas” for bloggers who cover the teams he owns (Ascherson, 1978: 131, as cited in Murdock, 1982: 140). Again, the instrumentalist assumption is not that owners interfere in the day-to-day work of media producers, but that
media workers may self-censor when covering matters that directly affect their owners’ investments (Jhally, 1989b; Murdock, 1982). The New York Rangers, for instance, have refused to issue credentials to SB Nation’s Blueshirt Banter, in part because Blueshirt Banter organized a rally calling for the team’s general manager to be fired21 (Gordon & Gordon, 2010). Might an SB Nation blogger covering the Washington Capitals or Wizards think twice about covering, much less actively organize, this sort of bad press? The question is material. Leonsis has two potential means of exerting (or threatening to exert) instrumental control over coverage he considers detrimental to his sports investments—a blogger’s access to his teams and that blogger’s position at SB Nation.

This theorizing suffers from pretty wide empirical holes, though. While Leonsis is an SB Nation investor, no evidence was found to suggest that he is also an SB Nation board member, where corporate decision-making occurs (Murdock, 1982). Moreover, the former AOL executive has a long list of current and prior new media investments (CrunchBase, n.d.). Nothing suggests that Leonsis’ SB Nation investment deviates from his others; he seeks new media holdings that, first and foremost, deliver a return on investment. In 2010, for instance, Leonsis discussed his interests in creating a team-owned TV network for the Wizards and Capitals. As SBJ’s John Ourand (2010: para. 5) explained of Leonsis’ intentions: “His desire to control his own content has nothing to do with how CSN covers his teams. It’s more about how much money CSN is making off of the content generated by Leonsis’ teams.”

The above discussion has focused narrowly on control of media content by owners of sports franchises. In sports, though, ownership of media holdings is arguably a more

21 The blog maintained that it merely reported on the rally.
powerful tool for amplifying the message than for restricting it. As Lowes (1999: 13) explains, the most important thing the commercial media provide for professional sports teams is “a lot of ink.” If Leonsis’ investment in SB Nation does influence media coverage of his franchises, it is in ensuring that his teams capture a larger share of the Washington, D.C. sports dialogue. The Capitals, Wizards, and Mystics have not, traditionally, received “a lot of ink” (or pixels) in the city’s cluttered professional sports scene (S. Klein, 2007; Leone, 2010).

Like some other professional sports owners whose teams receive (relatively) limited coverage in the mainstream media, Leonsis embraced new media as a means of amplifying the message about his teams. The Capitals are “considered the most new media friendly club in major league sports” (Leone, 2010: para. 19).22 Leonsis, who blogs every day at tedstake.com, says that, for sports teams, bloggers are “like oxygen”:

Bloggers tell more stories. Bloggers reach every nook and cranny of fan interest.

Bloggers are passionate and talented. They care about your franchise … As long as they abide by published and official guidelines I will always support the blogosphere as well as the mainstream media. (Leonsis, 2010: para. 7-8)

Not all professional sports franchise owners hold bloggers in the same light. In the NHL, new media’s access to organizations and players has been a contentious policy matter. Leonsis is the most vocal owner among the “doves”—franchises that “are extremely welcoming to bloggers” (Gordon & Gordon, 2010: para. 5). The “hawks,” on the other hand, include teams that (in general) already receive saturation mainstream media coverage and are

22 The Capitals were the first NHL franchise to credential a blog, doing so in November 2005. In 2006-2007, the team granted the blog offwing.com a full season press pass (McErlain, 2007).
resistant to bloggers “less than thrilled by some of the fan-based bloggers who opine about the team and the people who run it” (ibid: para. 6).

Instrumentalist perspectives typically look at media outlets as tools for shaping public perceptions toward policies that bear on an owner’s non-media investments (e.g., sports teams). In the dynamics described above, though, Leonsis’ franchise ownership puts him in a position to shape NHL policies, such as credentialing, in ways that could garner more coverage for his franchise and benefit his media investment—SB Nation. Were Leonsis to be successful in opening NHL locker rooms and press boxes to new media, it would expand the range of coverage options available to SB Nation.23

At the very least, Leonsis serves as a power broker for SB Nation within the professional sports industry. When Leonsis became majority owner of the Washington Wizards, Washington Mystics, and the Verizon Center24 in 2010, he squarely positioned himself among the sports industry’s elite. SBJ identified Leonsis as one of the most influential people in the sports business ("The 50 most influential," 2010: para. 8). Leonsis is not the only SB Nation investor with a stake in the media coverage SB Nations bloggers provide. For somewhat different reasons, Comcast may have an important stake too.

**Comcast: Synergy or more?**

Comcast Interactive Capital (CIC)—the cable and Internet giant’s venture arm—is a series B and C investor in SB Nation (Table 5). In leading the network’s 2009 funding round, CIC principal David Zilberman also gained a seat on SB Nation’s board (Swisher, 2009).

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23 As explained in Chapter 5, though, the importance of the fan perspective may discourage some bloggers from taking advantage of that access.

24 The Wizards, Mystics, and Capitals all play at the Verizon Center.
Board membership, as Graham Murdock (1982) points out, is a crucial component in translating ownership shares into a degree of allocative control for an investor. Among SB Nation’s major investors, CIC seems most likely to look at SB Nation an investment that could return benefits for the financier beyond a direct return from the blog network’s profits or eventual sale.

Indeed, in May 2010, on the heels of CIC’s series B-leading investment round, Comcast and SB Nation signed an extensive content-sharing and cross-promotional deal. No money changed hands in the arrangement, but SB Nation bloggers would appear on Comcast SportsNet TV shows and local websites, and SB Nation blogs would feature some CSN talent. In local markets where SB Nation and Comcast each operate websites, the two would carry each other’s news and analysis (Koo, 2010; Ourand & Fisher, 2010). For both Comcast and SB Nation, the deal is a classic play at exploiting corporate synergies between partners (Croteau & Hoynes, 2006).

Without accounts from board meetings it is difficult to know the degree of influence Comcast may have at SB Nation; however, trade publications (Ourand & Fisher, 2010) and industry insiders (Koo, 2010) noted CIC’s SB Nation investment in contextualizing the content-sharing and cross-promotion deal. Indeed, the SB Nation deal was good for Comcast in a few important respects. In 2009 and 2010, ESPN had launched five local websites in major U.S. metro areas—ESPN Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, and New York (Fisher, 2009, 2010a). While the Comcast SportsNet regional sports networks gave the cable giant a TV presence in several key markets, the company busily sought to build up its web offerings and holdings in those markets to position itself against ESPN’s local web investments (Fisher, 2011a; Ourand, 2011b). The SB Nation deal further buttressed Comcast
local editorial content, and it did so without incurring the costs of in-house editorial investments.

Comcast’s local efforts also occur within the broader context of the company’s January 2011 acquisition of a majority share of NBC Universal from General Electric. The deal brought together Comcast’s cable sports networks (e.g., Versus, Golf Network, and the SportsNet RSNs) with NBCU’s sports broadcast operations and major sports rights (e.g., Superbowl, Olympics) Indeed, some industry analysts suggest that a merged Comcast-NBCU creates a potential rival to industry leader ESPN/ABC/Disney (Ourand, 2011a; Schechner, 2009; Wallenstein, 2010). Local online sports content will be a crucial front in these efforts. As industry analyst Dan Shanoff (2010: para. 12) said of the Comcast-NBCU deal, “I cannot imagine that Comcast doesn't want [SB Nation] to play a role—perhaps a large one—in [Comcast-NBCU’s] sports-media uber-strategy.”

The Comcast-SB Nation relationship isn’t one-way. Distribution and cross-promotional deals with major (new) media companies help ensure the network’s content is accessible to users across the web. SB Nation has content and/or link sharing partnerships with Yahoo! Sports, CBS Sports, USA Today, Boston’s WEEI sports radio, Comcast, and NHL.com (Fisher, 2011c; Schonfeld, 2009; Vascellaro & Holmes, 2009).

To summarize, Comcast’s investment in and synergistic relationship with SB Nation suggests instrumental efforts (via its ownership stake and board position) to bolster the cable giant’s local offerings, to position itself vis-à-vis ESPN, and as preparation, perhaps, for an acquisition of the blog network; however, those efforts still occur within the context of SB Nation’s (and Comcast’s) structural imperative to cost-effectively manufacture audiences for advertisers. The promotional partnership with Comcast, like those with Yahoo! and others, is,
at the end of the day, an attempt to get links to SB Nation’s content in front of as many users as possible.

4.3 Manufacturing Audiences for Advertisers

To create returns for investors, SB Nation needed to be able to generate enough revenue to attract a buyer (e.g., Comcast, Yahoo!, AOL) so investments could be recouped. As a private company, though, limited information is publicly available concerning the amount of money SB Nation generates from different revenue streams; “burrowing” has its limits, especially when one “digs into” a private company. Information about the company’s revenue sources can be inferred, though, by visiting the site and by “listening in” to the trade press. Visitors to SB Nation sites need to log in to comment, but SB Nation does not sell any of its content or services on either a one-off or subscription basis (as of July 2012). The network’s visitors, in other words, do not pay for specific content or regular access to the network’s blogs. Like other media companies SB Nation faces a problem of substitutability: Only a narrow class of contemporary news producers is capable of charging for content—those whose content or brand is highly valued by readers and not freely available elsewhere. Financial publications, like the Wall Street Journal and Financial Times are oft-cited examples given their “valuable and time-sensitive brand of information” (Grueskin et al., 2011: chapter 3). SB Nation may very well be creating value for community members, and this value could, one day, yield subscription revenue; however, there is no scarcity of freely available sports news and opinion on the web. Were SB Nation to charge for content, users (and subsequently advertisers) would presumably move to a suitable alternative—a substitute. When digital sports media executives discussed this topic at the 2008 EconSports
conference, “All agreed ... that there’s little room left—for them at least—in charging for premium sports content” (Andrews, 2008: para. 8).

The network could potentially license its blogs’ content to other media outlets. To this point, though, SB Nation seems satisfied with setting up link and content sharing partnerships with major media firms and sports leagues (Fisher, 2011c; Schonfeld, 2009; Vascellaro & Holmes, 2009). Limited information is available about the terms of these deals; however, SB Nation does not appear to be selling its content to media companies. Rather, the network uses these partnerships to expand its reach and user base. As Bankoff (2009b: para. 2-3) explained of the network’s link sharing deal with Yahoo!:

SB Nation and our friends at Yahoo are partnering to give Yahoo Sports audiences one click access to our sites and content … Relevant pages of Yahoo Sports will now feature contextual links to specific SB Nation communities. Many other pages of Yahoo Sports will feature SB Nation content and links. The great news is that more sports fans will be introduced to SB Nation sites.

Thus, SB Nation seems willing to give away its content as a means of bolstering its user base and, in turn, advertising sales; more links to SB Nation content in more places on the web—especially prominent sites like Yahoo! Sports and CBS Sports—means more traffic to SB Nation’s blogs. This traffic is crucial in that SB Nation, like other independent blog networks, relies on advertising sales for the bulk of its revenue (Brundrett, 2012; Fisher, 2011b) This is not surprising, of course. Commercial media have long addressed challenges

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25 According to SBJ, the WEEI deal is involves advertising revenue sharing; however, for both the WEEI and Comcast arrangements, no specific financial terms were disclosed (Fisher, 2011c: para. 3; Ourand & Fisher, 2010: para. 4).
to direct-to-consumers sales by relying on the manufacture and sale of audiences to advertisers (Meehan, 2005; Smythe, 1981).

In its pitch to advertisers, SB Nation describes itself as a company that “builds bridges” between writers, sports fans, and teams. The company explains that it can help advertisers build their own “bridges” to potential customers:

By spreading your message to one or more of our more than 310 passionate sports communities, we can also help you build the bridge that matters most to your business, and help you enter into an authentic relationship with a special class of sports fan. (SB Nation, n.d.-b: para. 2)

Despite the limited available metrics, SB Nation seems to be effective in marketing this special class of sports fan to advertisers. SBJ’s Eric Fisher (Fisher, 2011b) reported that between August 2010 and August 2011, SB Nation’s advertising sales more than doubled. He noted that industry sources peg the annual revenue for online sports’ major independent properties (including SB Nation) in “the low to mid-eight figures” (ibid: para. 11). These figures, however vague, are important; SB Nation’s valuation—what it could expect to command from a buyer, like Comcast, Yahoo!, or AOL—is pegged, in part, to the company’s revenue.

In perusing SB Nation’s sites, one sees its success in marketing that special class of sports fan to advertisers. The major national brands that Bleszinski anticipated would flock to the network did, indeed, arrive (Terdiman, 2006). Where crude text ads once filled the sidebars on SB Nation blogs, “blue chip” advertisers like “Ford, Comcast, and EA Sports” now take advantage of “visually appealing, high-impact ad units” and “premium branding” opportunities (Brundrett, 2012: para. 8; SB Nation, n.d.-b; Sternberg, 2012: para. 12).
How is SB Nation attracting this advertising revenue from major corporate advertisers? Or, more specifically, how is SB Nation cost-effectively manufacturing audiences to these corporations’ specifications? Answering this question is crucial in that efforts to produce the types of audiences that advertise want to buy shape the organization of production and (subsequently) the output or content of media firms. The following outlines SB Nation’s strategies for cost-effectively manufacturing the large, demogenic audiences advertisers want to buy. Some of these strategies are time-tested approaches to audience manufacture by sports media firms. Others are innovations made possible by the networked, digital environment and SB Nation management’s strategic allocative choices.

Specificity and scale

SB Nation’s decision to organize its content around fans’ interests in specific men’s commercial sports teams is consistent with broad trends in news production and consumption. With the proliferation of media outlets and “the requirements to create tight bonds that lead to loyal consumers,” news organizations hoping to keep audiences’ attention increasingly seek to “specialize or localize” rather than offer “one-size-fits-no one” content (Picard, 2006: 130)

Given team sports’ basis in locality, when SB Nation created its blog-communities around specific men’s commercial teams it ended up both specializing and localizing. This was not enough to allow the network to charge for content, and hyper-local news have often failed to generate sufficient interest and audiences (Ingram, 2011); however, SB Nation tapped into fans’ appetites for content about their favorite (often local) men’s commercial sports teams, and it encouraged those fans to participate, as a community, in that discussion. While a host of other factors surely shaped traffic on a site-by-site level, SB Nation’s team-
specific blogs used these two strategies to consistently manufacture respectable audience sizes despite their level of specificity.

Even where a local, team-specific sports blog is able to consistently attract a respectable audience, that by no means guarantees the blog will be able to sell that audience to advertisers, much less major corporate advertisers. If “listening in” to the trade press made one thing abundantly clear, it was that “scale” is still crucial in attracting corporate advertising dollars. As sports blogger Anthony Brown (2011: para. 5-6) explained:

Real advertisers, the ones who sell real products, not the ones selling cross-links for Google placement, want a substantial audience—a few ten thousand page views per day. A good independent football blog might get ten thousand hits per month...in season. Few independents push that volume unless the blogger is already well known ... So standalone sports blogs are worth zilch because they do not draw the audience that draws real advertisers.

To deal with this problem, co-founders Bleszinski and Moulitsas organized SB Nation as a network of team-specific sports blogs, pursuing specificity and scale at the same time. Independently, a standalone sports blog’s audience may have been worth “zilch,” but together, a network of blogs could the aggregate the size of audience “real advertisers” are interested in reaching. More than simply aggregating large audiences, though, SB Nation’s network structure also allowed the company to manufacture those audiences more cost-effectively. As a network, SB Nation could “of the overhead of one site by running many” (McGann, 2010: para. 7). The company centralized platform development and advertising sales, eliminating costly redundancies on a blog-by-blog basis and greatly reducing the marginal costs associated with adding new blogs to the network. Thus, SB Nation could grow
quickly while manufacturing increasingly cost-efficient audiences. The network passed along those savings in the form of a falling CPM, and SB Nation’s audiences looked like an increasingly good buys to advertisers.

Local advertisers would seem like a “sweet spot” for the network given its team-specific structure (Sternberg, 2012); SB Nation’s small, centralized advertising sales team primarily targeted primarily national corporate advertisers, though. It is a focus that is aimed at marketing the network’s audience to premier brands, but it is also a product of the structural imperative to stay “lean” and cost-efficient. As Bankoff explains:

A small sales force can reach national brands, such as Comcast, Sprint or Absolut [Vodka], that may be interested in reaching niche audiences … I came in with a pretty strong opinion that you had to have an efficient business model, meaning you can't hire 500 local sales reps in this business” (Overly, 2010: para. 12).

Unlike advertising sales and platform development, editorial costs could not be similarly eliminated through centralization. Indeed, the network’s team-specific model relies heavily on each blog’s managing editor to serving as SB Nation’s “boots on the ground” within that community. As Bankoff explains:

Each brand [or blog] is managed by a blogger/writer whose job is to manage the site, manage the brand and set the editorial agenda. They have full editorial control over the sites, they build up these communities, and we pay them for their work. (Behling, 2010: para. 10)
Luckily for the network, it does not have to pay bloggers much for that work. Bloggers are compensated with a small monthly stipend (Plambeck, 2010). Among interviewees for this study, compensation ranged from $50 to $200 per month (as of Spring 2011) for their daily (or near-daily) content production, community management, and other publishing functions. Moreover, other uncontracted members of a blog’s editorial staff (including writers and comment thread moderators) are likely to receive no compensation for their work. Community members, many of whom are very active content creators, are unpaid. Why sports bloggers willingly create content and manage these blog communities for little-to-no pay will be taken up in Chapter 5. Suffice it to say, though, the network’s daily bloggers do it for a mix of personal satisfaction, social recognition, and, for some, the hope that they may parlay their work at SB Nation into employment opportunities “down the road.” Forbes’ Louis Dvorkin, who worked with Bankoff at AOL, calls SB Nation’s editorial structure “‘The New Newsroom’—a distributed force of content creators (incentive-based and free). It’s a very scalable labor model” (Dvorkin, 2011: para. 8). For SB Nation’s audience manufacture efforts, this lean, scalable labor model means that the network can pass along cost savings to advertisers, putting SB Nation, in turn, in a better position to capture online advertising market share.

Young, “tech-savvy,” affluent males

While SB Nation undoubtedly sought to reach large audiences, size is not the only factor advertisers take into account with such purchases. Advertisers are also looking for

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26 Rarely is the SB Nation compensation model described in the same way twice. The SBNation.com website describes it as “A revenue split of advertising spots” (SB Nation, n.d.-c: para. 3). According to Bankoff, “It corresponds a lot of with traffic, but also quality as well. There’s quantitative and qualitative factors that we use to determine how much someone can get paid (Behling, 2010: para. 10-12)
audiences with high concentrations of people in their specific target market. They will spend more to reach these audiences because they know they’re getting the most “bang for their advertising buck.” For advertiser-supported media like SB Nation, then, “financial success … turns on the [outlet’s] ability to deliver quality audiences—highly concentrated, homogenous audiences—in large numbers” (Lowes, 1999: 19).

Traditionally, sports media have been recognized for their ability to attract a demogenic audience that advertisers covet—young, brand-conscious males with disposable income and the willingness to spend it (Bellamy, 2006; Lowes, 1999; McChesney, 1989). Today, with more and more specialized outlets vying for this demographic’s attention, sports media’s continued ability to attract this “hard to reach” audience in large numbers is increasingly important (Bellamy, 2006; Ourand, 2011c; Rowe, 2011).

SB Nation bills itself quite explicitly as media company that delivers just this audience for corporate advertisers. As Bankoff told the trade press: “There aren’t many sites that can say they truly tap into the social sports fan, which I'd say is predominantly males age 18-34, with a lot of disposable income and who are rather affluent for their age group” (DuBois, 2010: 12). In its pitch to advertisers on SBNation.com, the network highlights the demogenic qualities of its “special class of sports fan”: SB Nation visitors are overwhelmingly male and college educated (an indicator of social class); further, 21- to 34-year-olds and households with incomes over $100,000 are each over-indexed, meaning that

27 In web marketing, an index (or composition index) shows how a site’s demographic make-up compares to that of the Internet as a whole. For any specific demographic segment, like 21-to-30-year-olds, the proportion of Internet users that fall into this demographic is represented as 100. If a network like SB Nation has a higher concentration of 21-to-30-year-olds than that found in the internet as a whole, its index will be greater than 100 (also referred to as “over-indexed”). For the figures above, an index of 201 would mean that the proportion of SB Nation’s audience that is 21-30 is slightly more than twice their
SB Nation attracts a much higher concentration of these demographics than their proportion of Internet users more broadly (SB Nation, n.d.-b).

To construct this audience, SB Nation built its blog-communities around the teams young males are presumed to have the most interest in—the men’s commercial sphere of sports. The network also normatively conceptualized its communities as male spaces for sports chatter. With a gallon of testosterone injected in these electronic sports bars conversations revolved around “coaching rotations, defensive match-ups, last minute injury updates … predictions … minor details, statistical insights, and dramatic storylines” (olympicmike, 2010: under "Pregame Chatter" and "The Reactions"). These blog communities, in other words, were built on sports chatter’s characteristic exchange of masculine cultural capital

SB Nation adds a few reasonably new digital wrinkles to its audience manufacture and marketing efforts, though. The first is SB Nation’s marketing of its users as “tech-savvy.” The tech-savvy crowd is a valuable demographic in that they tend to be young, affluent, consumption-oriented, and active and influential social and mobile media users ("Meeting the needs of the new financial consumer," 2011; "Targeting a tech savvy audience," 2011). Media outlets that can aggregate this audience stand to be handsomely compensated. As Nieman’s Tim Carmody (2011: para. 23) explains, “There’s fierce competition across all media for high-information readers/viewers/listeners/app users, particularly men, whether teenagers or middle-aged dads. This is a prime demographic for concentration among the Internet users more broadly. Media outlets that index higher on specific demographics will be able to charge more to advertisers that want to reach that specific demographic.
advertisers.” SB Nation actively pitches its users to advertisers on the basis they are not just males (as is customary for sports media) but “affluent, tech savvy males”:

[We] have a big male audience. You know, we have, depending on who you believe, anywhere from 10 to 20 million adult males—affluent, tech-savvy adult males . . . About 30 percent of our revenue, in fact, is coming from tech advertisers who are tech companies, whether it's Samsung or Sprint or Comcast or Blackberry. I can go on and on. And even the ones who aren't in the tech category are looking for affluent, tech-savvy males, whether it's Anhuieser-Busch or Absolute Vodka. (Dvorkin, 2011: in video)

Market research suggests that this “sports-tech” demographic, in particular, is a highly valuable consumer market. Fantasy football players, for instance, have been characterized as “hyper-consumers.” They consume products “in several leading product categories, such as beer, air travel, credit cards, and wireless” at rates “well in excess of both the general population and sports fans at large” (Fisher, 2008a: 3-4). Like SB Nation, the Fantasy Sports Ad Network also markets its audiences as an “affluent, educated and tech savvy demographic” ("About FSAN," n.d.: para. 2)

SB Nation made its attention to this tech-savvy demographic readily apparent when, in April 2011, it launched a consumer technology site named The Verge as its first non-sports vertical (Kramer, 2011). The Verge’s editorial staff included writers and editors that Bankoff had wooed away from AOL’s consumer technology blog, Engadget (Carr, 2011). Similar to SB Nation’s blog-communities, The Verge complemented its news and reviews of consumer

28 These data are from a 2008 Ipsos Public Affairs survey commissioned by the Fantasy Sports Association (Fisher, 2008a).
technology with community discussions organized around the gadget world’s brands and categories (e.g., Apple, mobile). While it would not be evident to a visitor that the two properties have anything to do with one another, both run on the Chorus platform and share the same advertising sales staff. As Bankoff explained, “audiences for sports and technology work well together for advertisers” (Dvorkin, 2011: para. 11). As paidContent’s Staci Kramer (2011: para. 5) notes, both SB Nation and The Verge attract “young, tech savvy affluent males.”

Upon launching The Verge, CEO Jim Bankoff described the company’s mission as “empower[ing] talented web voices,” and he added that the company “definitely will be pursuing other verticals with the same mindset” (Kramer, 2011: para. 4); however, through its resource allocation, the company has (to date) focused *exclusively* on “empowering” those voices that include and attract advertisers’ most coveted demographic. Indeed, the company’s next plan for a vertical is a gaming site named Polygon [polygon.com]—again, another young, tech savvy, affluent male audience (Grant, 2012).

**A “conversational environment” for “social informants”**

In circulating their marketing messages, corporate advertisers face the increasingly challenging problem of advertising clutter; their message competes for the attention of consumers amid a proliferation of commercial and promotional communication (McAllister, 2010; Rotfield, 2006). Further, consumers have at their disposal a range of media options and ad-avoidance tools, like AdBlock software, to try to avoid marketers’ messages (Lee, 2010). Given these conditions, advertisers are constantly looking for spaces and processes where they can “break out” from the clutter (Rotfield, 2006). Breaking out means, first, that audiences actually see or hear an advertisers’ message amid all this clutter, even if that means
paying more for a less cluttered space. And, second, when audiences are exposed to marketing messages, that the process be more engaging and meaningful for likely consumers. Thus media outlets stand to be handsomely compensated if they can manufacture audiences in ways that allow branded messaging to break out from the clutter.

SB Nation’s second digital wrinkle in its audience manufacture strategy aims to help national advertisers do just this. For instance, through its “premium branding campaigns,” SB Nation offers advertisers the opportunity to essentially take over much of the commercial messaging across the network’s blogs.29 Here, national brands literally wrap their appeals around the network’s editorial content. For instance, a Guiness campaign on SB Nation’s football blogs incorporated branded messaging on the page’s “skin” (or background) “a background takeover, a top banner, a main ad to the right, and then the ‘presented by’ branding around NFL Game Day” (Eldon, 2012: para. 26). Thus, an advertiser like Guiness can—for the right price—stand out among the clutter.

Advertisers don’t just want their messages wrapped around media content, though. As various trends in “product placement” demonstrate, advertisers want their marketing messages integrated within media content, too ("Morning show payola," 2011; Soar & Ericsson, 2000). In doing so, their messages stand a better chance of being seen/hear; consumers can’t avoid the branding without also avoiding the media content.

SB Nation facilitates this sort of unavoidable marketing through its “sponsored posts.” Here, editorial content from the network’s bloggers, as well as contests and polls, are “presented by” a national brand; a user can’t read the post’s headline without exposing himself to this branding. Some of these sponsored posts are editorial content that a blogger

29 Or at least a specific portion of network blogs, such as SB Nation’s NFL blogs.
might otherwise publish—for instance, an analytical feature about the team or a game preview; however, other sponsored posts aim to make these brands part of the conversation in these blog-communities. Indeed, SB Nation’s pitch to advertisers encourages them to “Get into the conversation” (n.d.). Take, for instance, Captain Morgan’s “Captain of the Tailgate” and Samsung’s “Enhance Your Experience”—each was a series of sponsored sports posts published on SB Nation blogs. These posts typically refrain from a “hard sell”—telling users to “buy a bottle of Captain Morgan.” Instead, the editorial content of these sponsored posts revolves around topics like tailgating and sports media technology that are material to both the advertisers’ products and the sports fan experience. In the conversational exchange that characterizes SB Nation blogs, users are encouraged to also talk in the comment threads about their own tailgating and technology experiences.

For instance, in July 2010, SB Nation partnered with Electronic Arts to “introduce” the company’s NCAA 2011 video game to the network’s college football blog-communities. This series of sponsored posts was titled “Where I come from” and bloggers and users alike were encouraged to offer accounts of how they came to be fans of their favorite team and what membership in that fan community means to them (Behling, 2010). SB Nation’s Oklahoma Sooners blog, Crimson and Cream Machine, introduced the series of posts as follows:

In preparation for next week's release of NCAA Football 2011, EA Sports asked to sponsor a week's worth of posts leading up to Tuesday, July 13th. They weren't interested in telling us what to say, only in sponsoring a series of posts celebrating the diehard fans of the greatest college football team in the world: The Oklahoma Sooners.
That means we'll be celebrating our Sooners and how we cheer for them all week long. We're going to go in depth on exactly what it means to be an OU football fan. I'll be posting once a day between now and the release of the game next Tuesday, with the series: How I Came To Be A Diehard Sooner Fan …

EA Sports and I would like to invite you to jump in the comment section of each post and tell us where you came from. It's going to be a great week! (ccmachine, 2010: para. 2-3, 11)

Here, SB Nation’s community-building emphasis, its platform investments, and its attention to blogger and user feedback during platform development have all been crucial to its audience manufacture efforts. Indeed, with these sponsored posts, SB Nation is not producing an audience commodity so much as a prosumer or produser commodity (Fuchs, 2009). Through its community-building and platform-centered focus, the network facilitates and guides what Bankoff describes as a “conversational environment” (Behling, 2010)—and SB Nation packages and sells to corporate advertisers as an opportunity to get their brands “into the conversation.” As Bankoff explains:

We're creating this very interactive environment … We partnered with [EA Sports] to introduce [NCAA 2011] into our community. But we didn't just slap up an advertisement … We thought that we would start a conversation around those topics. [Advertisers] are looking to engage fans in that conversational environment. (Behling, 2010: para. 13-14)

By “introducing” brands in this way, the network helps ensure marketers that their messaging is both unavoidable and (presumably) more engaging and meaningful for the consumers that populate SB Nation communities. While independent metrics are not
available in these regards, Bankoff says that, “30% of SB Nation users who view sponsored content interact with it in some way—by clicking on links, voting or commenting. He also points to a 1% to 2% clickthrough to advertiser sites from sponsored content” (Dvorkin, 2011: para. 12). As Forbes’ Louis Dvorkin explains, “That may seem low, but it’s not at all considering that clickthroughs on banner ads are often below 0.5%” (ibid: para. 12).

There are limits, of course, to the commercialization of SB Nation’s editorial fare and conversations among its community members. Based on personal observation, these sponsored posts tend to receive far fewer comments (and, presumably, readership) than other front page posts. Further, when sponsored posts are integrated in ways that users do not consider appropriately “conversational,” SB Nation and its advertisers can receive backlash. For instance, in May 2011, SB Nation published sponsored posts for Comcast’s Xfinity service to the network’s NFL blogs. The network did so without a mention (editorially) of each team and without comment threads for SB Nation users to respond to the posts. A FanPost to the network’s Seattle Seahawks blog, Field Gulls, demonstrates the animosity hypercommercialism can arouse among the network’s users:

**Xfinity**, thank you for putting commercial ads on our site therefor [sic] sponsoring it and helping to pay the authors. But **FUCK YOU** for your inability to simply include advertisements on the side that take up no post space or "sponsored posts" by OUR writers, and instead clogging our site up with your own shit. (Jorgensen, 2011: para. 5).

Typically, SB Nation does not inject sponsored posts into its blogs’ editorial content in the manner that this community member took exception to. More often, a lead blogger drafts and publishes sponsored posts (albeit with suggestions from the advertising sales
team). In this, the post and the marketing message are coming from someone that the community tends to trust and respect. Corporate advertisers like to have their messages conveyed by the trusted and respected members of a social group. Indeed, SB Nation markets its “hardcore sports fans”—including lead bloggers and active community members—as “social informants” capable of influencing the consumption choices of more casual fans (Behling, 2010; "The new game in sports journalism," 2010). By getting a brand “into the conversation” among these hardcore fans, SB Nation argues that it can create a multiplier effect for a corporate advertiser. As Bankoff explains:

We activate the base of the hardcore sports fans and once we do that they help to influence the more casual sports fans, and those tend to be a very valuable demographic who make purchasing decisions—predominantly a young, male demographic with a lot of disposable income—and advertisers are seeking to be in front of an influential audience. (Behling, 2010: para. 15)

SB Nation’s ability to facilitate this sort of social influence seems to have been an important factor in the network’s acquisition of venture capital financing. Take, for instance, Accel Partners, which was involved in each of SB Nation’s A, B, and C fundraising rounds (Table 5). In 2009, two members of Accel’s investment team, Andrew Braccia and Kevin Efrusy published “The Rise of the Social Web,” a white paper that explained the venture firm’s investments in “social web” companies, like Facebook, Groupon, and SB Nation. For advertisers, Braccia and Efrusy (2009: 1-2) argued that the social web taps into the trust and relevance of people that we have a social relationship with:

The Social Web is ideally suited for businesses that are fueled by word-of-mouth distribution, affiliate networks, and local communities … One might not click on a
sponsored search listing for a realtor, but knowing that his friend or neighbor used her means much more. The recommendation feels like content or information, not an ad. Social Web players might argue they can create demand as opposed to merely fulfilling demand like a search engine.

To summarize, SB Nation marketed conversational environment on its blogs as an opportunity for advertisers to stand out amid the clutter of contemporary marketing by organizing some of that conversation around advertisers’ brands. Moreover, because that conversation occurred among the network’s highly influential audience, corporate advertisers stood to have their brands and products evangelized by a base of influential hardcore sports fans. In short, if a campaign was executed well an advertiser stood to have their branding communicated to by sports fans, to sports fans in a more engaging and meaningful way, further facilitating a rise above the clutter.

**The big push**

The conversational environment of SB Nation’s community spaces is undoubtedly important in the company’s audience manufacture efforts; however, the network is always, at the same time, facilitating an editorial processes wherein each blog’s staff produces news and opinion for both its community and a wider audience of sports fans. Getting that news and opinion in front of those readers is important if the network if to manufacture its demogenic, influential audiences for advertisers on a day-in, day-out basis. Making this work across a network of blogs was no simple task, though. As Nieman’s Laura McGann explained (in Carmody, 2011: para. 28), SB Nation’s “sophisticated platforms” needed to be able to:

- manage many sites at once
- blend local and national news
• blend text with multimedia
• facilitate reader participation and content creation
• update developing stories in realtime using “story streams”
• whittle down a huge number of stories to find the most important/relevant while still allowing news junkies to go as deep as they’d like
• push news everywhere and to every device sports fans want to find it

Each of these considerations were no doubt important; however, in the network’s internal communication, one consideration stood out among all others in SB Nation’s audience manufacture efforts. With their “insatiable appetite” for sports content (Rader, 1984), SB Nation found that sports fans simply could not get enough news and opinion about their teams. As a company best practices document titled “Increasing Posting Frequency” explains:

[VP of Product and Technology, Trei Brundett] and his tech team have done a lot of research about what drives traffic to our blogs. The number one reason for higher traffic, according to Trei and his teams’ statistics is frequency of posting. It is without a doubt that the number one thing that makes one of our blogs go from very little traffic to our top 25. Our top 25 blogs are almost always universally the blogs that update the most frequently, whether it’s the offseason or in-season. ("Best practices: Increasing posting frequency," 2009: 1)

With frequent posts identified as the number one driver of traffic to SB Nation’s blogs, the challenge for the network was in figuring out how to ensure that bloggers were constantly posting. As Chapter 5 will explain, bloggers cite personal and professional time constraints as one of the biggest challenges they face. In making professional-quality
publishing as easy and efficient as possible, SB Nation’s Chorus platform put the network’s bloggers in the best position to publish frequently, maximizing the size of SB Nation’s demogenic, influential audience. Additionally, SB Nation’s slick publishing system gave the company a superior marketing tool for attracting bloggers and users to the network. As Jeffrey Clark, lead blogger for the popular Celtics Blog said of his joining SB Nation, “I had my own ad revenue and dabbled in HTML, but it was too hard to manage all of that … I wanted to get back to writing” (Hart, 2009: para. 10).

SB Nation developed the Chorus publishing platform with sports bloggers in mind; however, there was nothing about the system that said it could only be for sports content. Indeed, in November 2011, upon launching its consumer technology vertical The Verge, Bankoff announced that SB Nation would rebrand itself as Vox Media. “Vox” is Latin for voice, and as Bankoff explained:

We are calling our company Vox because its essence is a collection of strong voices: our talented experts, our communities and our employees. It's our role to support and enable those voices and our marketing partners with an exceptional product platform. We believe it's the combination of talent and technology that will define success in premium digital publishing. ("Introducing Vox," 2011: para. 3)

While rebranding announcements are, by definition, symbolic, Bankoff’s description of Vox Media is helpful in highlighting the company’s “product platform” as the firm’s focal point for resource allocation and, perhaps, its most valuable asset. Indeed, the company identifies its platform as its “product” and its platform developers as its “product team.” They create the publishing tools that sports bloggers, tech enthusiasts, and (soon) gamers use to
efficiently publish professional quality news and opinion about the topics they’re most passionate about.

**Section summary**

Vox’s characterizes its platform as its “product.” This web 2.0 reformulation of traditional misunderstandings about commercial media’s principle product that Smythe identified and critiqued. Vox’s platform is *not* its product; consumers do not pay Vox for its platform. Instead, advertisers pay Vox for (1) the passionate user-communities that create content with its platform and (2) the audiences that traffic its sites to see what bloggers and their communities are talking about. This mix of user-communities and audiences is the company’s principle product. Since some consumers are more valuable to advertisers than others, though, Vox focuses its attention on manufacturing the type of user base advertisers will pay the most to reach: young, affluent, tech-savvy, and socially influential males. The company manufactures this narrowly tailored product by freely offering its platform to users for discussions of specific topics, like men’s commercial sports and consumer technology—topics that are presumed to be of interest to advertisers’ most coveted demographic.

Moreover, Vox works with its content creators and users, identifying their preferences for a more attractive and productive experience. In this, participants help the company figure out how what platform features can streamline the content production process, driving more readers to network blogs. Users’ input also helps Vox make sites more appealing places for other bloggers and community members to join and participate. Thus, Vox taps into prosument processes in both the creation of content and platform design, allowing user-communities to more efficiently market themselves and others to corporate advertisers.
Chapter 5: SB Nation Bloggers’ Blogwork Routines

5.1 Motivated bloggers

Chapter 4 attributed SB Nation’s success in securing advertising revenue and venture capital financing, in large part, to the network’s cost-efficient manufacture of large, demogenic communities of users. By investing in platform develop Advertising dollars flow disproportionately toward those media outlets that offer the best buy on the audiences advertisers want to reach (Jhally, 1989b). SB Nation’s ability to cost-effectively manufacture user-communities is, in part, a function of the network’s organizational structure, wherein platform development and advertising sales are centralized rather than redundant costs for each blog; however, SB Nation also relies on limited blogger compensation to keep costs low and maximize revenue from advertising.

Of course, SB Nation still needs to attract readers to its blogs (and keep them there), and Chapter 4.3 highlighted a range of strategies for doing so. Of these, the network’s emphasis on regular and frequent posts has the greatest bearing on individual bloggers’ practices is. SB Nation’s “economic logic” calls for its team-specific blogs to produce news every day, and as frequently throughout the day as possible, whether the team is in-season or out-of-season. As the network’s “Community Building Best Practices” document explains:

It's critical to keep content moving. Not posting regularly is like leaving planks out when building [your blog as] the bridge [between fans and their team]. It may not be fatal at first but it’s going to make people unsure about crossing. If it happens enough they're going to bag it and find another way over [to their team]. It doesn't matter how
great your content is. If people can't depend on it being there they won't stay.

(Deckard, 2009: 13)

Interviews with SB Nation bloggers indicated that, on an individual level, they too aimed to publish regularly and frequently in the hopes of regularly attracting readers to their blog-communities and keeping them there. As C.J. put it, “I subscribe[s] to the ‘more post the better theory,’ if I can make it.” Others bloggers indicated that everyday posting was a “personal ethic” or “personal goal.” As Tim said, “I always make a point to have something up every day, if only so there’s a reason for people to keep reading On The Prowl.”

These structural pressures and everyday publishing practices raise an intriguing question: how is SB Nation able to generate the content it needs to attract user-communities if key human resources in that process—the network’s team-specific bloggers—are minimally compensated? The next two sections explore SB Nation’s relationship with its team-specific bloggers, particularly bloggers’ willingness of to contribute content regularly and frequently on a largely (and in some cases entirely) volunteer basis.

**Qualitative freedoms**

At SB Nation, network management is largely “hands off” with respect to day-to-day editorial choices for each of the network’s team-specific blogs. Interview participants reiterated this point time and again:

*Chris:* I can pretty much write whatever I want to. I’ve never been told what to write or what not to write or had anything that I’ve written come back and say, “you need to re-think how you do this in the future.”
Mike: They actually [laughs] stay away from us . . . I’ve never once—. Not one time have I received a phone call or an e-mail like: “Hey you can’t write that,” or “you need to change that,” or “you need to pull that down.”

Tim: SB Nation as a whole makes a point of it to be hands-off with respect to content. I’ve never been told by anybody at SB Nation, “This is what you have to write. This is what you have to do.” They basically say, “Here are the tools. This is what we suggest you do, but run your site as you see fit.”

Stephen, who occupies a management role in the SB Nation editorial hierarchy, explains that his management responsibilities are more “administrative” than “editorial.” Like the bloggers above, he reiterates that he and the rest of the network’s administrators are “hands-off” in their dealings with the network’s team-specific bloggers:

The blogs really have complete editorial freedom. So I don’t go to [a blogger] and say, “hey, I’d like you to do a story about [a player’s] shooting woes.” Each blogger writes what they want to write. They really write how they want to write. We have a very limited set of guidelines for what they do, and it’s really just common-sense stuff about, you know, “Don’t steal other people’s work. Don’t be a raci—.” You know, just really limited, basic, common-sense rules. Everything else they do is up to them as far as content.

In each of these selections, SB Nation bloggers describe considerable latitude in terms of what to write about and how to write about it.30 These emphases on autonomy are not without their corollaries to the struggle over what “real journalism” is (Carlson, 2007; ___________________________________________________________________________30 SB Nation does have strict guidelines on the posting of illegal or copyrighted content by bloggers and users, as well as the use of obscenities in headlines (“Taking advantage of good headline writing,” 2009);
Deuze, 2005). Sports bloggers bolster their own claims to authority by arguing that journalists are beholden to the interests of media management, advertisers, and the institutions journalists claim to hold accountable (Blood, 2002; Carlson, 2007; Lowrey, Parrott, & Meade, 2011). The following, for instance, are the main bullet points from an SB Nation blog’s more than 4,000 word critique of ESPN:

1. ESPN’s editorial decisions are based primarily not upon independent journalistic judgments but upon marketing considerations …

2. Due to its predominant position in the industry, ESPN gives the impression that it has no responsibility to do more than pay lip service to its constituency in response to criticism …

3. Because ESPN is guided by marketing and promotional considerations and regards itself as impervious to criticism, the Worldwide Leader scripts predetermined storylines and refuses to deviate from them in the face of subsequent events …

4. Because "The Narrative" is the 800-pound gorilla in the middle of the room whom no one at ESPN can or will acknowledge, the Worldwide Leader refuses to recognize its tangible (and, sometimes, decisive) influence upon the events it purports only to cover as a disinterested bystander …

5. Since ESPN lacks either the self-awareness or the integrity to acknowledge its impact upon the sports it covers, the Worldwide Leader is neither adequately cognizant of nor suitably deferential to those to whom it is beholden … (King, 2007: para. 16, 18, 26, 36, 42).
Not all interviewees took such a hard line on mainstream sports media as the author of this post. Indeed, a wholesale rejection of traditional or mainstream sports media is unlikely given bloggers’ heavy reliance on those outlets for news and information about the sports world. Still, the distancing of interviewees from mainstream media by way of claims to autonomy was common. Take, for instance, these responses from James and Tim to whether a more traditional or mainstream sports media industry job would be of interest to them:

James: Yeah, I think it’s kind of funny. Like it would, but I wouldn’t want to . . . with the way things are with SB Nation, like I can’t do what I’m doing with them, full-time. So there is a little bit of it where I’d want to [take an industry job] to provide for myself and further my career, but at the same time it’s like, “how much limitations would that put on your writing?” . . . Because basically right now I can say whatever I want and feel however I want about the team and express that, but—.

Tim: I really don’t have any interest in terms of being a journalist. You know, I can’t see myself working at a paper and being assigned to say, “you’re going to write about this topic.” You know, like I said, one of the big benefits of blogging, in general, is you can write about anything you damn well please.

Structurally, bloggers do have a degree of leverage in ensuring that networks like SB Nation do not meddle in their day-to-day editorial practices; they can just as easily leave the network and start a blog on a free publishing service like WordPress or Blogger. Indeed, several interviewees noted that these free platforms were where they started blogging about their favorite teams. The freedom and flexibility of those platforms shaped and qualified their expectations for blogging at SB Nation.
Chris: You know, with my [previous, personal] site I had the freedom to do whatever I wanted to, you know. And I wanted to make sure I had that same kind of leeway [with SB Nation]. And they said, “Yeah, that’s not a problem.”

Further, it might be argued that a degree of editorial autonomy is not just permissible at SB Nation, but fundamental to the business model. If SB Nation is reliant on bloggers to both attract readers and build communities, meddling in day-to-day editorial practices may be counterproductive to those ends. As Stephen, who is employed in SB Nation’s editorial management hierarchy explained:

Again, the bloggers, understand these are folks that are pretty much doing this as a hobby, and we’re very cognizant of overloading them, telling them what to do, and telling them how to do things. You know, we position that more as, you know, “here’s tips to help more people find what you’re writing.”

Quantitative pressures

It would be a mistake, though, to say that SB Nation is completely “hands-off” with respect to content. Again, the network’s economic logic calls for its team-specific blogs to produce news every day, and as frequently throughout the day as possible, whether the team is in-season or out-of-season.

Given this prerogative, SB Nation’s contractual terms with bloggers stipulate certain minimum productivity requirements. These terms include: 1) generating a minimum number of posts per week and 2) publishing content for every game. In essence, these stipulations amount to story quotas and deadlines (since games are time-sensitive):
Phil: The original requirement was [long pause] say nine posts a week. Nine posts a week, and then you always had to have—. There’s a requirement to have a game thread also, to have a comment thread for every game.

Tim: [W]ithin 6 hours of a game ending there needs to be something up about the game. It doesn’t have to be a lot, it just has to be something, something relevant. I believe that’s page three of the contract somewhere.

Mike: [S]o my contract with SB Nation mandates that I’m supposed to write the preview and the recap for every single game and write I think two or three columns a week, and my co-writers have to work under the same contract … Basically, as a blog, we are responsible for previewing and recapping every game and having one new piece of content up every day—except for weekends, unless there’s a game.

There was some discrepancy among bloggers concerning these specific contractual terms. Some said that no weekly quotas existed. Others said that publishing content in conjunction with a game was a de facto standard rather than a contractual term. These discrepancies are largely a moot point, though. SB Nation higher-ups rarely have to act on the company’s contractual terms with team-specific bloggers:

Chris: I think for game recaps they generally want us to have something up by—.

You know, for a nighttime game, usually around 7:30, they want us generally to have something up by 9 a.m. the next morning. But they’re pretty lenient with that.

Tim: I’ve never—. I think I’ve only missed that time period once, and nobody ever said a thing about it because I got something up later in the day. I think SB Nation—. I mean, I don’t think, I know SB Nation only steps in when somebody’s like not active for weeks.
To supplement these contractual terms, SB Nation also uses incentive programs to encourage regular and frequent posts. Contests are one such mechanism. C.J. noted a contest in which blogs were tiered by traffic, and the blog that published the most posts over the course of a month in their tier won a cash prize. Tim highlighted another incentive program (not a contest) wherein blogs were offered more money each month if they hit a daily threshold of four posts. The network runs risks, though, in introducing veiled efforts to squeeze productivity out of minimally compensated bloggers:

Tim: When the incentive was dropped, at least to the hockey group, I think everyone—. At least 90% of the group immediately got into panic mode and upset mode and then into anger mode … I mean—. What are you going to do when there literally is no hockey news? Or what are you going to do if your writers bail on you, and it’s just you? Like, what’s going to happen in that case?

Contractual terms, contests, and incentive programs are good indicators of SB Nation Leadership’s desire for regular, frequent posts; however, each offer weak explanatory frameworks for understanding why SB Nation bloggers publish content as regularly and frequently as they do. The network’s leniency toward missed deadlines/quotas and the voluntary nature of its incentive programs each indicate that the company is constrained in its ability to coerce bloggers into regular, frequent posting. What leverage is a ‘pink slip’ in squeezing more productivity from someone who is minimally compensated and has a day job?

Common sense publishing

SB Nation bloggers’ regular and frequent publishing is less a product of coercion than cooperation. In its efforts to secure this cooperation, SB Nation employs a few important
strategies. First, in building out its network, SB Nation actively recruits bloggers with not just “voice” and potential for readership, but also those with an existing track records of regular, frequent content production—both in-season and out-of-season. An SB Nation page titled “I want to blog for your network” explains that:

Prospective bloggers must have a blogging track record for the team or sport they want to write about. We’re not concerned with the amount of traffic you have. Rather, we want to see a proven commitment to your team/sport, regular updates and quality writing. What do we consider "quality" writing? We can't describe it, but we know it when we see it. If you're passionate about a team or sport we don't cover, but haven't started blogging yet, we suggest starting out on your own with a free service such as WordPress or Blogger. Put a month or two of effort into it and see if you have the writing talent and the time devotion necessary to be a strong blogger. And if you're ready to make the commitment, contact us and we'll see if we have a roster spot for you. (SB Nation, n.d.-c)

Several interviewees noted that they had just such a track record prior to joining the network, and they highlighted the regularity of publishing as a determining factor in their being selected for inclusion in the network. Aaron and Phil both contended that it was their regularity and frequency of posts, first and foremost, which made them attractive additions to the SB Nation network.

Phil: I think that the blogosphere is littered with, you know, with blogs that lasted for a week or a month or two months or whatever … SB Nation’s goal obviously was something a little bit more grandiose and a little bit more long-term, and so I think it was a factor to say—. You know, anybody can blog during the playoffs. A lot of
people are going to step in and do something. But the person that’s writing every day in the off-season, or four times a week during the off-season or whatever, that’s being consistent with their output—. That’s the one that’s going to be an appropriate addition to a network that has the aim of being, you know, covering all the sports and all the teams.

_Aaron_: [My blog] wasn’t an especially, I think, you know, well-read or quality blog, but it was—. I wrote it every day. I really stuck with the team. I watched every single game. I wrote about every single game. And I think at the time [SB Nation was] mostly looking for, you know, someone who could write somewhat coherently, was not a complete miscreant, and was _regular_, most importantly, I think, was the thing that was crucial for them.

Beyond recruiting bloggers that post regularly and frequently, SB Nation also works to construct these practices as common sense among its team-specific bloggers. The network does so by positioning traffic growth as not just a corporate imperative (which it is), but as a taken-for-granted goal of all network bloggers. For instance, regular and frequent posts and search engine optimized headline writing are constructed as normal, natural, and good practices since they facilitate traffic growth. SB Nation describes optimized headlines as being “in everyone’s interests” and traffic growth as being something “we all want”:

>[F]or stories in which it’s in everyone’s interest to take advantage of the following headline writing tips to help bring in new readers to your site via Google News and other web aggregators … Good headline writing will get more eyeballs of more interested readers to your writing. If that seems obvious, it’s less obvious why
countless writers in the blogosphere spend so many hours writing a post and so little thought writing a headline that will bring more readers to their written work. Ultimately we all want our traffic to go up. We all want more people reading our stuff and interacting because it becomes much more fun to blog. And Trei’s studies have shown that frequency of posting is the top reason why our blogs grow. That’s why you see certain independent blogs outside the network who don’t have the best writing still having success. They update often.

The network’s publishing tools also play a subtle role in positioning regular and frequent posting as normal, natural, and good. Again, in developing its proprietary platform, SB Nation created systems and formats that facilitated highly productive publishing. Built into these tools is the implicit understanding that content should be produced regularly and frequently. For instance, bloggers have access to performance metrics that allow them to monitor traffic trends, search engine optimization indicators, and their own publishing practices. In other words, these tools offer bloggers a means of self-surveilling their practices and results; implicit is a reminder of the end goal—traffic—and the means to get there—regular and frequent posting:

C.J.: SB Nation’s got a built-in counter, and we can track our trends—what we’ve done. And it’s getting better. They’re improving it all the time. We see how many tweets we sent out from the site, how many posts were posted on that day—. We can see what search words, what keywords were picked up in the post. So things like that, they give us some tools to use.

Blog post formats, like the StoryStream and FanPost, also normalize and naturalize frequent publishing. The very option of a FanShot (versus a full blog post or a FanPost)
implies that (at least some) news and opinion can and should be created and shared with brevity and rapidity. Indeed, these formats were designed with the quick sharing of information, ideas, and hyperlinks in mind; the end goal of traffic growth is, again, implied:

[U]se the technology that Trei and his team created for you. Even if you don’t necessarily have the time to write a lengthy composition about your team, use the FanShot functionality to at least get community members talking. It doesn’t take as much time as writing a story and brings people back who subscribe to your updates via RSS feeds to see what the new post is ("Best practices: Increasing posting frequency," 2009: 1).

Do these subtle network efforts actually influence or shape bloggers’ posting patterns? It is difficult to say. What is clear, though, is that traffic growth is a taken-for-granted goal of SB Nation bloggers. Indeed, rather than stating this goal outright, it was often implied in conversation:

James: We couldn’t really ask for much more than that [player’s] trade. I mean that was giving us eyes all over the place. As far as for us, I know that was big. We do pretty well with our USA Today links as well as our Yahoo links.

C.J.: The Sixty-Sixes blogging community, it’s not huge. The [community] was centralized on three or four [blogs], and these guys, you know, embraced me. I linked to them, they linked to me, they helped grow my traffic, you know. And the main thing was just updating constantly.

Eric: I handle our Facebook page, which is used to drive content to more readers.

Moreover, SB Nation bloggers acknowledge the network’s encouragement to pursue traffic growth and to do so through regular and frequent posts.
Chris: [T]he NBA guy for SB Nation—. He said, “Here’s something you should shoot for,” but he never said, “You have to,” you know, “do X amount of posts a day or a week” or anything like that.

Tim: [A]ll the higher-ups are very pleased with On The Prowl. It’s grown considerably within the last few years. At the same time, the fact that there is something up every day, it’s not something thrown half-ass together, there’s always something interesting there, that people—. They’re really pleased with what they have.

Section Summary

In more traditional news organizations, like those studied by Tuchman, Fishman, and Lowes, most journalists were wage laborers. They had a good deal of autonomy in deciding what to write about and how to write about it, but if they did not make news on a daily basis and in accordance with the production schedule, they risked losing their jobs. Dutifully reporting news on a daily basis may be a cornerstone of journalism’s professional ideology; however, the standards of professionalism also mask the coercive leverage of the “pink slip.”

Like traditional news outlets, SB Nation also requires content on a daily basis to attract readership to its blogs. In fact, since it is not tied to a daily newspaper’s production schedule, SB Nation’s economic logic calls for content on a continual basis. Unlike more traditional publishers, though, SB Nation does not have the same set of coercive tools at its disposal for ensuring this continual productivity; a ‘pink slip’ offers little leverage over volunteer content creators. Luckily for the network, SB Nation rarely needs to go to coercive lengths to enforce deadlines or story quotas. SB Nation bloggers are generally willing to produce content regularly and frequently without being forced or handsomely compensated
to do so. The network secures content production from its bloggers not through coercion, but through cooperation.

This section has provided some preliminary insights into why this is the case. While SB Nation does have some productivity guidelines, it extends bloggers considerable latitude in deciding what to write and how to write about it. SB Nation bloggers value this autonomy. Second, the network selectively recruits bloggers with track records of prolific posting. So the thinking goes: if bloggers post regularly outside of the network (often without compensation), they will be likely to continue doing so for SB Nation. Third, the network constructs traffic growth as a shared goal of bloggers, and it forwards prolific posting as a common sense means for achieving that growth. Finally, this ideological framework is built, implicitly, into the formats and self-monitoring mechanisms of the SB Nation platform.

These efforts by the network are not enough, of course, to ensure bloggers are posting regularly and frequently. Simply put, if bloggers do not want to write and be read, the network’s efforts are for naught. Section 5.2 explores the extra-compensatory motivations that factor centrally in bloggers’ content production practices. SB Nation bloggers place considerable value on: the fun and personal satisfaction of the productive process; the opportunity to perform fandom and interact with other fans; and the hope that blogging for SB Nation might open doors to work opportunities “down the road.” These motivations propel regular and frequent content production at the network’s team-specific blogs.

5.2 Motivated bloggers

SB Nation needs its team-specific bloggers to publish content on a regular and frequent basis to attract the communities of users that it sells to advertisers. It is through this sale of users to advertisers that the company generates revenue. While SB Nation’s
organizational structure allows the network to manufacture those communities of users at cost effective rates, its limited blogger compensation structure also constrains the company’s ability to coerce bloggers into prolific publishing. Instead, the network seeks and relies upon bloggers’ cooperation in publishing content that attracts its valuable user base. SB Nation’s efforts in securing this cooperation only take the network so far, though; bloggers must also desire to write and be read. Conveniently for SB Nation, the network’s team-specific bloggers do desire to participate in this productive process—indeed, of the network’s wishes or efforts.

To understand why the network’s team-specific bloggers willingly generate content for SB Nation at little-to-no compensation, the following chapter identifies some of the key non-monetary motivations gleaned from interviews with those bloggers. These motivations should not be understood as uniform across the network or even among participants in this research. They should be understood, instead, as themes from those interviews (sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit) that lend insight into why SB Nation bloggers pursue their craft, and why they carry it out the way that they do.

It is argued that in through creating content and/or managing their team-specific blog communities, SB Nation bloggers derive “socially recognized self-realization” from their work (Arvidsson, 2008: 332). That is, SB Nation bloggers are motivated by the opportunity to create content and communities to the best of their ability and from receiving peer recognition for doing so. In these efforts, social understandings of sports fandom shape bloggers’ pursuit of their craft in important ways. However, a secondary motivation, described here as “hope labor,” (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2012) is the hope that the experience and exposure of working for SB Nation will lead to employment opportunities for bloggers.
“down the road.” It is argued that these motivations, while not uniform or necessarily comprehensive, play determining roles in bloggers’ work routines—they both propel and constraining certain content production practices among bloggers within the network.

**Social production at SB Nation**

SB Nation, like many other web 2.0 companies, relies on and seeks to facilitate what Yochai Benkler (2006) has called “peer” or “social production.” Social production involves decentralized networks of actors that freely enter into production processes without the direction of a central organizer or the motivations of money or commands (Benkler, 2006). While discussions of social production typically point to non-profit organizations, like Wikipedia, Linux, or Indymedia, though. Many of web 2.0’s most visible and successful commercial ventures, like YouTube, Flickr, Facebook, and Twitter rely on their users’ social production to generate revenue.

Like these commercial ventures, SB Nation is built largely upon social production. In this decentralized network, most of the sports news, opinion, and discussion are produced without the directives of corporate management or monetary compensation. In doing so, editorial staffs and users produce themselves as saleable communities of users for purchase by advertisers. Where compensation *is* provided and where management *does* issue some directives—as is the case with some of the bloggers/managing editors interviewed for this study—compensation is often minimal, and those directives are not stringently enforced. Social production, then, can be understood as the sole form of production among users within SB Nation’s blog-communities and an important, if not primary, form of production among much of the network’s stipend editorial staff.
Why do people dedicate their time and effort to social production in (and of) online communities? Reviewing literature on the motivations behind social production, Arvidsson (2008: 332) explains that studies “have consistently come up with the same result. The most important motivation that people state for taking part in social production is what we could call socially recognized self-realization.” Breaking this idea down, we can say, first, that people engage in social production (in part) for the intrinsic pleasures and challenges of meaningful productive processes. As Tapscott and Williams (2006: 70) put it, “Basically, people who participate in peer production communities love it. They feel passionate about their particular area of expertise and revel in creating something new or better.” Arvidsson (2008: 332) says that in this “pleasurable act of self-expression” we actually approach what Marx described as non-alienated labor: “to do what one does best according to one’s own ideas and to realize oneself in one’s very productive activity”; however, Arvidsson explains that this self-realization is not the sole motivation for social production. Peer or social recognition is an important, complementary motivation. “It is not enough for me to know that I [excel at some creative task]. I need a community of people whom I recognize as my peers to recognize this fact, in turn” (Arvidsson, 2008: 332).31

SB Nation bloggers cited motivations for creating content and managing SB nation’s blog-communities consistent with the pursuit of socially recognized self-realization. Importantly, though, these pursuits are fandom-inflected. As the following explains, bloggers

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31 The motivations of socially recognized self-realization, it should be noted, are not unique to the online environment. Ursell (2000: 819) says that television work offers “tantalizing possibilities . . . for securing social recognition and acclaim, that is self-affirmation and public esteem, and partly by the possibilities for self-actualization and creativity.”
write about the teams they love as a means of both “realizing” themselves as writers and fans and being recognized as such by others.

**Writing and community building for self-realization**

To an outsider, a sports blogger’s practices may look like little more than a leisure activity; however, for the SB Nation bloggers that maintain and are the most visible ‘voices’ of their communities, blogging is much more than a hobby. The practice is an enjoyable labor of love from which bloggers derive deep personal satisfaction.

*C.J.*: It’s been *fun*. You know what I mean? That’s the most. I get enjoyment out of it. When I first started out, it was just a hobby I did on the side, and as time has went on, I look at it now and I’m like—. I’ve discovered SB Nation, you know, kind of everything that they’re about … I’ve had a real rewarding time from doing it—trying to get better at it ...

*Tim*: What I do may take up a lot of my free time, and one could argue I should be doing more substantial things than this. But, at the same time, I get more enjoyment out of this for various personal reasons, and at the same time it helps keep my mind sharp … I’ve spent a lot of hours doing it, but I don’t consider it to be a waste. In fact, I consider it to be one of the best things I’ve ever made.

*C.J.* and “Tim’s” comments highlight that bloggers don’t *just* derive personal satisfaction from merely writing about the sports they enjoy. Satisfaction also comes from “making” something (a popular blog-community) and from “bettering” themselves as writers. Yes, they do like to write about sports; however, real satisfaction comes from doing that well. Bloggers noted conscious efforts to improve their writing, and they sought out ways to boost their blog-community’s visibility, reach, and vibrancy. Genuinely hard work is
poured into creating posts they are proud of and creating blog-communities within which that writing can flourish.

*Chris:* I’m constantly trying to challenge myself to write things well: to edit my work; to think of the correct way to say things; to think of the most descriptive way to say things; to evoke emotion through the use of words. The one quote that always sticks in my mind was actually said by Stephen King, the horror writer, where he said …

“If you want to be a writer and you’re not reading at least three hours a day and writing three hours a day, you don’t really have a shot.”

*C.J.*: I feel like I can take more advantage of [SB Nation’s analytics tools] more now than I could back in August because I didn’t understand enough. But I’ve worked on it. I’ve read. I’ve tried to research it, and now I’m starting to understand search engine optimization a lot.

When this hard work translates into improved writing or a vibrant community of fan-users, the fruits of these efforts are especially meaningful to sports bloggers. A sports blogger has an opportunity to “realize one’s self in one’s own productive activity”:

*Eric:* [A] rewarding experience is just going back and seeing that I did do a good job on a story I published. There are times I write really quick, brief stuff. Other times I write heartfelt features on certain subjects—stuff that takes a while to get out. When I do that, and I go back and see what I had written and how that illustrated the point I wanted to make—that makes you feel real good. Accolades from my peers are great. But, even if this seems selfish or narcissistic, a well written story is just as great sometimes …
Eric’s note about accolades from peers is important. Motivations for social production derive from the self-realization of improving as a writer or building a vibrant community, and also from peer recognition and feedback on that hard work. Writing for and facilitating a community of passionate fans affords bloggers voluminous opportunities for this sort of recognition.

Mike: It’s nice to know that there’s a huge audience that appreciates what you’re saying and what you’re doing.

Tim: [P]eople really love what I do, and those people come from all walks of life ...

I’ll be frank with you T.C., being appreciated for doing something you enjoy, on your own terms, you know, it never gets old ... You know, I’ve been doing the same damn [day job] for three—three-and-a-half years ... So I can go home and spend several hours a day doing On The Prowl for very little money, but because people appreciate it, and it’s something I enjoy doing and enjoy discussing, you know, it’s not work at all and I feel much better doing it.

Given the network’s distribution arrangements and social media integration, blogging for SB Nation, in particular, creates opportunities for sports bloggers to receive social recognition from audiences beyond their blog-community’s users. SB Nation bloggers can also receive recognition from legitimated sports and media institutions—a rewarding perk of blogging for the web’s fastest-growing sports blog network.

James: [I]t’s also led—. Like we get requests—. Like I’ve gotten requests for radio interviews and a lot of—. You know, around playoff time we’ll do, either with SB Nation blogs or with other bloggers that find our site, you know, we get to do some collaboration work with them, as well as like this right now too.
Tim: [W]ithin this last year or so of blogging, I’ve contributed to a book, I’ve held court with the other big names out there, I’ve had reporters e-mail me about the great work I’ve done—not just hockey reporters, like Mike Frederick of the [metropolitan daily paper] of all people. I’ve shook hands and talked with the owner, like in an actual journalistic environment. I’ve had the Wildcats organization ask me to meet with them to talk about, you know, roles, and you know, this-and-that in the biz. I’ve had an agent contact me.

Eric: It’s [rewarding] when there’s general public recognition for something I wrote. When someone says that I—personally—have a great article on such-and-such.

Phil: The reward is the community. But I mean, you know, there’s an ego aspect involved for sure. You know, I’ve got a platform I’m on. I’ve got an audience, and at least there’s certainly—. There’s a certain amount of reward in that.

Chris: So from my first little blogging project [before SB Nation], you know, it was a great day if I got a hundred hits. Obviously, by being part of SB Nation that increased exponentially. And so, I think it feeds the ego in that way …

Performing fandom for socially recognized self-realization

Interviewees noted the value they derived from improving as a writer, building a vibrant community, and earning recognition for doing each; however, sports blogging also offers opportunities to realize one’s self as a “big” or “real” fan of a given team and to be acknowledged as such by other fans. In other words, sports blogging offers a means of (personally) pursuing and (socially) performing and gaining recognition for one’s fandom. Indeed, the importance of sports fandom in bloggers’ conception and execution of their practice cannot be understated. Bloggers’ discussions of their own fandom, whether explicit
or assumed, littered the interviews. With the exception of just one interviewee (who came to blogging with a passion for NBA basketball, rather than a specific team), each pointed to his team fandom in explaining his practice.

Tim: Like I said, I really love the Newport Wildcats. So having an outlet for that is fantastic.

Mike: I’m not really sure why I do it other than I just love doing it, and it brings me closer to my favorite team … Why would you do it if you’re not a big fan, you know?

In offering an outlet for fandom’s pursuit and performance, normative social understandings of sports fandom shape bloggers’ conception and execution of their practice. In other words, ideas about what it means to be a big or real fan influence the ways bloggers make sense of and engage in sports blogging on a day-to-day basis. In this process, the practices of a “good” sports blogger come to reflect normative understandings of fandom. To make sense of this process, I situate interviewee’s accounts of their practice in relation to four normative statements about what it takes to be a real sports fan. I derived these statements from both my review of the literature on fandom (Section 2.4) and from my discussions with bloggers about their practices.

Real sports fans commit (time) to their teams

First, fans and sports bloggers take it for granted that a real fan of a given sports team commits considerable time to following that team, and he does so on a regular basis over many years. Sports blogging serves as a visible means of pursuing this normative notion of fandom-as-time-investment. In Section 5.1, I noted that SB Nation bloggers aim to create content every single day during their team’s season and as often as possible throughout the off-season. Moreover, on any specific day, interviewees reported spending considerable
amounts of time—hours in many cases—watching games, consuming sports news, producing content, interacting with community members, and carrying out other editorial and community management functions.

Chris: It’s probably a couple hours a day. I probably spend like an hour in the morning, and then, you know, a few minutes here and there throughout the day to try to piece together stuff. Some of the longer things that I write, I typically tend to take a couple days to do it.

James: [Y]ou don’t realize how much time goes into a post. You know, I’ll start writing something at like 5:00 and I’ll look up and it’s like ten, eleven-o-clock at night, and you’re like, “Wow. Where’d that time go?”

A 2009 Curley Center survey of (mostly SB Nation) sports bloggers found that most daily bloggers (60%) work more than two hours on their blog every day, and eight percent reported more than eight hours of daily blogwork ("From outside the press box," 2009). Bloggers invest in more than content and community when they commit several hours each day to blogging. They also invest in themselves, as fans—a visible, public investment that peers can recognize, in turn.

Since they spend extensive time following their teams, real fans know about their team’s latest news. In this, SB Nation bloggers conveyed an emphasis on speed and immediacy, valuing opportunities when they can break news. This is not breaking news in the sense of being “first on the scene;” rather, bloggers break news from the fan perspective, sharing what they learn, when they learn it, often with a few brief thoughts about the developments.
C.J.: [T]he best feeling in the world is when I can catch something that comes from the Sixty-Sixes beat writer, and then I’m the first blog to have it up … When I was at [my previous blog] that was one of my goals. I wanted to beat the guys at [SB Nation’s] Box Out Boys and the guys at the [ESPN] TrueHoop blog. I wanted to have it on my site before they did …

Chris: So in my opinion, one of the better blogs out there that covers the NBA—. It’s through the Yahoo! website. It’s run by Kelly Dwyer—Ball Don’t Lie … I feel like he does a really good job of looking at the entire landscape, but also gives up-to-the-moment news as it breaks, and I think that if I had the time and the resources to do—. I would probably—. Not that I would use him as my model, per se, but I think my style would definitely be similar.

By publishing breaking news, bloggers drive traffic to their blogs while demonstrating that they are constantly in-the-know about their favorite teams. Posting about breaking news conveys to readers a blogger’s continuous, rapt attention to his favorite team provides another means of pursuing and performing fandom. Interviewees were mixed, though, on the importance of breaking news—a finding that will become more readily understandable when bloggers’ perceptions of the journalism are accounted for.

**Real sports offer insightful analysis of their favorite team**

Second, real sports fans demonstrate their knowledge of the teams and sports they follow by offering rich, insightful analysis of those teams’ games and news developments associated with the team. More so than breaking news, interviewees identified “analytical” posts as those they valued most and derived the greatest pleasure from producing. Most
commonly, bloggers “break down” and explain what happened or may happen in a team’s games.

_Stephen_: I love getting in there and, you know, breaking down the nuts and bolts of plays. About how—. You know, “Why does Jefferson have only two assists when he’s playing with guys that Moyers used to get twelve assists with. You know, “How does he play the pick and roll versus Anthony? How do the Bison defend the post? You know, there’s just _so_ much you can get into. I just love doing that.

With previews and recaps a _de facto_ standard for each game, SB Nation bloggers have copious opportunities to create rewarding analyses. Again, this is not analysis-for-analysis’ sake—previews and recaps are occasions to perform fandom regularly and analytically. As Tim explains, readers expect and appreciate these posts:

_Tim_: So over time, people have come to expect a lot of details, a lot of opinions. You know, the recaps are not just a simple summary of what happened in the game. You know, there’s engrossing detail on certain players who played well, even if they didn’t score a goal and things like that. People have come to sort of expect that and appreciate that.

Bloggers also try to explain the impact of players’ injuries, the relative value of different roster configurations or trade options, and their team’s prospects for the next season. Sports offer no shortage of developments like these to analyze, explain, or predict. As with breakdowns of specific games, bloggers find these processes rewarding; they offer opportunities to pursue and perform one’s sports knowledge.

_Chris_: I feel like I’m on sort of the verge of figuring something out—what the trade has meant for both teams in a way that I haven’t seen reported yet. And so that’s part
of the piece I’m trying to figure out … I really feel something was going on with that team make-up that just hasn’t really been captured yet, at least in written form. And so I’ve just been thinking about trying to figure out what exactly hasn’t been said yet.

Bloggers use analytical posts to struggle over and offer solutions to sports puzzles. In doing so, bloggers can distinguish their knowledge about the team they cover from that of less “serious” fans and bloggers. Sports analysis, then, functions to produce hierarchies among fans, bloggers, and blog communities.

Tim: Icing and Other Tasty Treats was more of a—you know—your stereotypical, “Hey we’re in the upper deck. We had a few beers. We want to tell you what we think.” I eventually grew my site to be more of an analytical take on how the Newport Wildcats are playing—looking at stats, looking at opinions, looking at how a player has played beyond just how many goals they’ve scored, and ultimately delving a little bit more into advanced statistics … And it can be a lot more educated than just what you would hear on sports radio or what you would read on a message board.

Other bloggers also pointed to advanced statistics as a component of analytical blogging that they valued or that they hoped, one day, to incorporate in their posts. The privileging of statistical analysis as a way of knowing the sports world reflects a gendered understanding of sports analysis in the exchange of masculine cultural capital. Attention to sports statistics allows bloggers to mask a necessarily selective editorial process, backing assertions with facts and figures. In the process, the blogger discursively constructs his expertise or authority. While more often implied in interviewees’ discussions, this gendered dimension of analytical blogging bled through in some of the interviews:
Tim: I think there was another perso—two sisters who ran Curiosity Killed the Penalty. Not really a sort of a serious hockey blog, more of a “Hey we knitted something. We have an opinion on the Wildcats game with a whole bunch of cute phrases, what-have-you.”

Mike: This is going to sound really cocky and egotistical, but I know more about the Pirates than the guys that follow the team for the [metropolitan daily newspaper]. I know more about the Pirates than any other Pirates blogger, and I know more about the Pirates than anybody that currently works for the Pirates … And I’m not kidding … I’m not sure if that’s something I should be proud of [laughs], but it is what it is.

Real sports fans “chatter” about sports with other fans.

In many respects, the analytical posts noted above are, themselves, examples of the sports chatter that circulates around the blogosphere; however, it is important to recognize that within SB Nation’s blog-communities, users’ exchange of sports chatter occurs most voluminously in the comment threads that follow bloggers’ posts. Since this chatter is a normative component of fandom, it is unsurprising that bloggers’ relationships with community members do not end when they hit “publish.” Bloggers frequently noted the enjoyment they derive from interacting with fellow fans in these comment threads, as well as through other channels, like e-mail, Facebook, and Twitter. In doing so, they have opportunities—beyond traditional editorializing—to pursue and perform sports fandom, socially.

James: … people will ask questions or they’ll point something out or whatever. So we’ll get in [the comment tread], mix it up, talk with them a little bit.
Tim: But in terms of interaction, you know, I do comment regularly on the site. I will, you know, reply to people. I will exchange thoughts with people. You know, if somebody e-mails me, I’ll e-mail them back. If they talk to me on Twitter, I tweet them back. I like to think of myself as—. Again, the big reason I have On The Prowl is because, you know, I want to talk Wildcats hockey. And most of the time, you know, I’ll write a post, and someone will have an opinion or a question or criticism—I’ll respond to it, and so will the other writers to their posts.

This interactivity between bloggers and users is not just enjoyable for bloggers; it is also directly in keeping with the network’s best practices guidelines for “building your community”—or, as the document’s author puts it, “being the bridge” between a blog and fans of a given team. The first rule in this regard, according to the network, is to “Respect and respond to your readers”:

 Especially in a small Community, this is THE most critical thing you can do. Acknowledge great comments and Fanposts. Respond in-depth to people's ideas. Let them know that you're not only posting, you're listening. As your relationship develops you'll find that your team is not the only “bigger than themselves” thing your readers want to be connected to. Your blog will take on a life of its own. Like Cheers, it will become the place where everybody knows their name. That starts with you knowing their name and acknowledging it. (Deckard, 2009: 10)

In keeping with this logic, bloggers acknowledged that their efforts to interact with users were both a source of enjoyment and a conscious effort to “build their communities” and “get the conversation going.” These community- and conversation-building efforts compound opportunities for socially recognized self-realization: bloggers can create blog communities
through which they make meaningful connections with people who appreciate their efforts, while, at the same time, they gain a wider, more engaged user base to read and respond to their posts and comments.

*C.J.*: All the blogging references I had read before was, you know, “building your community by interacting with these guys.” And, you know, I enjoy that. I enjoy interacting with them … A lot of times, you know, we can get in some pretty good discussion and you find out a lot about some of these people.

*Phil*: When I was growing the community, I would read every single comment on every single post. I would respond to most of them. I mean part of that was trying to get the conversation going, and I think that was an important part of building the community.

Even those bloggers that did not interact regularly with readers acknowledged that doing so was a normative component of a sports blogger’s practices, and that they hoped to more thoroughly engage their communities in these regards. As “Chris” explained, “I’m trying to, but honestly I’m not very good at it because I am new to the blogging world.”

One of the key spaces within which bloggers engage in this sports chatter is on the popular SB Nation game threads. Again, these are comment threads where a blog-community’s users discuss a team’s game as it happens. Indeed, C.J. described these threads as like “being at the sports bar, watching the game.” In discussing sports as they happen in large groups, these popular threads produce a context that is ripe for socially recognized self-realization.

*C.J.*: Like tonight … I’m expecting anywhere from five- to seven hundred comments in that thread tonight. And me and [my co-writer], when we’re both available, we’ll
get in that comment thread with them, and we will—. We’ll just talk about things that happened in the game. And I’ve got those dedicated guys that are gonna come in and we’ll have a discussion. Depending on my schedule it might only be a couple of comments, but on some days we’ll have a discussion all day if we’ve got time for it.

Sports chatter, again, offers a mechanism for deploying skills and knowledge that function as a form of masculine cultural capital. These dynamics are not lost on SB Nation. Indeed, the network’s best practices documents suggest that when you “know how to build community”—when you “make people feel comfortable and welcome”—you can build masculine sports communities akin to the vibrant women’s media communities of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*. As SB Nation’s best practices document on “building community” explains:

[Ellen DeGeneres] makes people at ease. She invites them in. She makes them feel like they're right alongside her. Through her they touch a fantasy life that's basically one big slumber party with interesting visitors … Inject a gallon of testosterone into that and replace “slumber party” with “sporting event” and you've got some idea of how people will feel about you if you can manage these things with your community. (Deckard, 2009: 2)

With this gallon of testosterone injected into the conversation, it is unsurprising that SB Nation reproduces the largely male demographic make-up of sports media audiences more generally. Interviewees acknowledged the largely male participation on SB Nation comment boards.

*Aaron:* [B]ecause I choose to participate in a lot of the comment sections, I think I have a decent sense of demographics. And I think it’s a lot of people … you know,
early 20’s, a lot of guys still in school, and I would say almost all guys, probably ninety percent male. There are some, you know, devoted girl readers, but they’re few and far between.

Phil: I really don’t know much about the demographics … Predominantly—I mean, almost—overwhelmingly male. In terms of people that comment, I think I could name five females. So, overwhelmingly male.

**Real sports fans wear their hearts on their sleeves**

The sections above have argued that the pursuit and performance of real fandom shapes sports bloggers’ practices. Here, fandom has been understood as a social category that is created and recreated through everyday practices. For sports bloggers, these practices include (but are not limited to) blogging analytically about sports, engaging in sports chatter with other fans, and doing each on a day-in, day-out basis for extended periods of time. Importantly, though, this construction of fandom operates alongside the re-creation of other social categories (e.g., masculinity and femininity) that may support or challenge one’s claim to fandom. Real sports fans, including sports bloggers, must negotiate associations with other social categories that do not adequately allow for fandom’s full pursuit and performance; real sports fans are *fans*—first and foremost.

For sports bloggers, this process plays out most intriguingly as bloggers negotiate their relationships to sports journalism and sports journalists. While the relationship between bloggers and journalists, more generally, has not been without its disputes, *The Boston Phoenix’s* Adam Reilly (2008: 3) argues that the relationship between *sports* bloggers and *sports* journalists has been more contentious—a dynamic exemplified by the Bissinger-Leitch feud on *Costas Now*. As Reilly (2008) explains:
Here’s the old-media critique: sports bloggers (most of them, anyway) are uncouth brutes laying waste to a proud journalistic tradition … And here, for the sake of balance, is the new-media riposte: the sports coverage you get on the web is a bracing corrective to the smug, lazy complacency of what passed for sportswriting (most of it, anyway) in the pre-Internet days.

Interviewees’ perspectives on the sports journalism-sports blogging relationship are complex and far from uniform. Some bloggers expanded on Reilly’s critique of traditional sports journalism. ESPN served as a whipping-boy of sorts for critiques that sports media organizations had grown too close to the organizations they cover and too willing to insert themselves into the story. Bloggers also chided traditional sports journalists for their lack of meaningful engagement with fans, especially given the affordances of new media:

*Chris:* [H]istorically, if you’re talking about the mainstream media, the professional writers who cover sports on either the national level or the team level—those guys have not been accessible to the fans. They might do an online chat, or they might do an e-mail mail bag, but ultimately it’s at their discretion what questions they choose to answer. And so I think the sports blogging world takes that a little bit closer so that the two parties are closer together in terms of interaction.

Despite these critiques, it should be noted that interviewees for this study were generally amiable in their accounts of sports journalism. They expressed special regard for beat reporters, who (as discussed in Chapter 5.3) bloggers rely on heavily for sports news and information that they can pass along to readers and opine on themselves. Given this general amiability, perhaps Reilly was prescient in suggesting that sports bloggers and journalists would soon “have to focus on the merits of the content, not on the mode of delivery.”
This is not to say, though, that the categories of “journalist” or “blogger” held no meaning or importance to interviewees—quite the contrary. Bloggers’ conceptions and evaluations of journalistic practice shaped the way they approached their own blogging. More specifically, in assessing the value of practices that are more or less characteristic of traditional journalism, bloggers have to negotiate an uneasy relationship between sports journalism and sports fandom. Indeed, some bloggers saw journalistic practice as more or less incompatible with normative conceptions of sports fandom, and, thus, a threat to their claims to fandom. Again, real sports fans are *fans*—first and foremost.

Tim, for instance, explained that he had no interest in being a journalist because journalists are assigned topics to write about: “one of the big benefits of blogging, in general, is you can write about anything you damn well please.” So what is it that bloggers want to write about that journalists cannot? Or, how is it that bloggers want to write that journalists cannot? Bloggers regularly point to detached, objective journalism as an institution directly at odds or in tension with the passionate pursuit and performance of fandom.

*C.J.*: I don’t have a problem referring to myself as a sports blogger, because that kind of bridges the gap to being—that’s still being a fan. You know, whereas if I was writing for the [metropolitan daily paper], you know, I don’t know if I could refer to myself as a fan at heart and do the job, you know, how it needed to be done if deep down I had this love for the team. You know, I can be passionate about the team, but I don’t know if I could report honestly if I really, really, really liked on player, and he was playing and did something, you know, then I’m trying to sugar coat it, so to speak.
This perspective—that journalistic conventions constrain one’s ability to be a fan—was common among interviewees, especially in their discussions of credentialed access to sports events and organizations. Indeed, the suppression of fandom among credentialed journalists (however impossible) is an institutionalized demand of professional sports writing. As SB Nation motorsports editor, Jeff Gluck (2011: 2-3) explains, “The cardinal rule of sports writing is simple: No cheering in the press box. ... If you are credentialed as media at a sporting event, YOU DO NOT CHEER IN THE PRESS BOX. It's very simple, really.” Much like C.J., Tim explained that he had been approached about credentials, but he perceived that this access would also curtail his fandom, and, thus, the enjoyment he derives from blogging.

Tim: I’d rather be in analysis. Because when you do become a journalist it means you can’t support the team when they do well. You can’t cheer from the press box. Basically you’re turning what you enjoy into a job. … But, you know, I’d rather pay for my tickets and yell whatever I want from the stands, and then go home and say, “This is what I witnessed from my seat, from my vantage point.”

A post by SB Nation Denver Nuggets blogger, Feinstein (2010) offers useful insights in these regards. Feinstein argues that bloggers—or “fans-as-columnists”—are able to tackle topics that matter to fans, and they can wield greater explanatory license in doing so since bloggers are not bound by professional journalism’s standards of evidence:

As a fan, I can question [then-Denver Nuggets NBA player] Carmelo Anthony’s toughness if I feel the signs add up saying so. As a journalist, I can only question Melo’s toughness if I know for a fact that he’s able to play, but is electing not to by confirming the story with multiple sources close to the team or in that locker room.
Feinstein (2010) argues that as bloggers become more popular with readers they seek or are offered credentials, and, with that access, bloggers run the risk of inhibiting their ability to speak, as fans, about the teams they cover. In an argument that will be readily familiar to journalism critics, Feinstein says that access to sources introduces pressures to be “fair and balanced … which often comes across as being soft and lacking a firm point of view” (para. 9). This sort of ambivalence is inconsistent with normative understandings of what a real fan is. Feinstein describes this as “the Blogger’s Dilemma” and he “suspect[s] every writer and editor at SB Nation is wrestling with this right now as I am” (para. 7).

Despite the perceived limitations that come with credentials, several interviewees noted that they had either covered an event for SB Nation with credentials or were seeking credentials. Stephen, who had blogged for more than two years without credentials, saw “pluses and minuses” from his present, credentialed access to the team. On the one hand, it allowed him to write in a more informed way about the team he covered, but, on the other hand, he noted tamping down some of his fan emotions.

*Stephen:* [I]f you’re around the team a lot, you really—. You get to know the personalities—. You get to know sort of the themes and what’s going on with the team, and that influences—I think in a positive direction—the writing. You’re better informed to talk about things. The flip side of that is, you know, you can be influenced, just ‘cause in the normal course of human reaction, it’s harder—although we still do it—. It’s harder to slam a guy that you have a relationship with. You definitely have to think through the implications of what you’re writing … But definitely the team is reading what you’re writing, so you think that through … I
write negative things all the time when it’s deserved. But you’re more thoughtful about it, and more—. I’m gonna say “less emotional.”

Similarly, in their efforts to secure credentials from the team’s public relations staff, James and his co-writers’ made conscious efforts to limit profanity in their posts. This effort sat uncomfortably, though, which his normative conception of the sports fan and his unbridled enthusiasm: “I don’t know, we pretty much want to be able to say whatever we want, cause we’re trying to be like the voice of the fan, so we don’t really want to censor ourselves or limit ourselves to any topics”

What is interesting (and perhaps anathema to traditional journalism’s stalwarts) is that sports blog readers may not necessarily value balanced reporting from well-cultivated sources to the same degree they do the subjective, biased accounts of passionate fans. Former Wall Street Journal Online reporter, Jason Fry (2010: para. 8), notes his puzzlement when readers of his New York Mets blog took his writing more seriously when it was critical of the Mets and flatly biased in its approach:

This seemed ridiculous: Our blog made no bones about its utter subjectivity, but we were seen as more objective than [traditional sports journalists] for whom objectivity was a commandment. Paradoxically, there was a power to subjectivity: Since nobody could accuse us of being anti-Mets, our criticisms of the team were taken more seriously.

Interviewees regularly noted the value of the “fan’s perspective”—whether that be the physical vantage point of watching a live event from the stands (as Tim stresses above) or the subjective vantage point of writing about a team one is personally invested in. James explained that he shifted from reading traditional sports journalism to blogs because, as fans,
bloggers follow their teams very closely and they are invested in the subject they are covering. Given the view that sports journalism inhibits fandom and may, in some respects, offer a less trustworthy claim on the sports world, it is unsurprising that some bloggers actively distance themselves from sports journalism and its conventions.

Aaron: I’m really a die-hard fan of the team. I don’t claim to have any sources or be able to report anything first hand or provide any objective content. It’s very subjective, biased, and, you know, nuanced and voiced content … I would say I’m trying very hard not to be a sports journalist … you know, when I’m around the team, not stepping on the toes of reporters, and even when I’m at home writing my blog, you know, not trying to report objectively. I re-hash a lot of news, I re-use stuff, but I editorialize quite a bit and I do it from a completely biased point of view.

Hope labor

SB Nation bloggers cited motivations for creating content and managing the network’s blog-communities that were largely consistent with the pursuit of socially recognized self-realization. Financial rewards, however, were not absent from bloggers’ motivations—they are simply indirect and delayed. Some bloggers are driven by the potential full-time work that might come ‘down the road’ as a result of their current blogging. These included full-time roles within the SB Nation hierarchy, as well as jobs as television sports pundits, sports columnists, or employment with sports organizations—including the teams they cover. Specific plans were rare; instead, most bloggers had rather vague employment hopes:

James: My hope anyway is that this will lead to something else but—. Maybe not something else, but that this will turn into something I can do full-time, which is
something that I’m passionate about and something that I love to do. So I just think it would be, you know, kind of the perfect storm if I could do that.

_C.J._: I mean sometimes it’s dreaming, but I like to set goals and I like to try to keep myself pushing that way, you know, hope—. Hoping that an avenue or a door might open or an opportunity might open, you know, and maybe it’d be something that I could—will be beneficial to me.

_Tim:_ [A]ctually I could still see myself still doing this five years from now. Who knows where it will take me, maybe it’ll lead to a job, maybe it’ll lead to a career . . .

Maybe it’ll get me on TV. I have no idea. I’ll be frank, T.C., I don’t know if I should be on TV, but it might [laughs]—it might get me there.

_Phil:_ I would suspect that I would be in the queue for an actual paying job at SB Nation. If the network continues to grow there may be opportunities of that sort. It certainly could be a stepping-stone to a different paying job also.

Even bloggers that didn’t share these aspirations indicated that this outlook on work is common among SB Nation bloggers. As “Mike” explained, “I suspect most of the guys you’re talking to want to have a career as a sports pundit. They want to make it their full-time job.” Likewise, Tim described SB Nation bloggers as “hobbyists trying to make it big.”

These labor dynamics have been described as “hope labor”—“un- or under-compensated work carried out in the present—often for experience or exposure—in the hopes that future employment opportunities may follow” (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2012: 2). Hope labor is not unique to sports blogging. Others examples include communities of volunteer video game “modders” (Postigo, 2007), sports apparel designers (Füller, Jawecki, & Mühlbacher, 2007), and consumer reviewers (Kuehn, 2011). In her interviews with unpaid
consumer reviewers for the website Yelp.com, Kuehn’s (2011) interviewees indicated that they saw their reviews, recommendations, and photographs as potential stepping stones toward paid writing, photography jobs, or some other form of work gained through the connections made within the social network. Indeed, throughout contemporary media work, Mark Deuze (2007: 77) explains that, “people seem to be increasingly willing to participate voluntarily in the mediamaking process to achieve what can be called a networked reputation.” He points to Amazon book reviewers and YouTube actors and videographers as examples of media workers who, at times, are able to translate recognition for their voluntary work into a subsequent book contract or professional television work. Given the web’s interconnectivity, volunteers “can quickly gain an audience and build a positive reputation that hopefully they can translate into actual business opportunities” (Deuze, 2007: 78).

SB Nation bloggers see the network as a viable, even ideal context for the developing this type of networked reputation. On top of publishing tools they describe as superior, bloggers point to SB Nation’s growth in legitimacy, traffic, revenue, and distribution relationships as boons to their ambitions with the company or elsewhere:

*Mike:* [I]t’s as legitimate as you can get while still being an independent blogger . . . They have a very powerful national, or maybe now international voice. I do think there’s a lot of cache being with them. It’s like saying, “Hey look, I was good enough for these guys. So I should be good enough for credentials. I should be good enough for—.” Like, for example, I had one of Evansville’s sports radio stations approach me about doing a weekly Pirates show. So SB Nation does—. SB Nation, like, they don’t pay you a lot, but they deliver you traffic numbers that no blogger could deliver on his or her own.
C.J.: When people like [Fanhouse’s Tom Ziller and ESPN.com’s Rob Neyer] come along [and join SB Nation], it just gives us all more credibility . . . You know, it was a big decision leaving my own blog . . . But now I look back at it and it was the best decision I ever made if I’ve got more aspirations. Because to me if SB Nation’s gonna be the number one entity in this, then that’s who I want to be with going forward. I think there’ll be just more opportunity there.

Without any sort of empirical data to evaluate the likelihood of such efforts, SB Nation bloggers frequently offered anecdotes of others that had made the jump from blogging (at SB Nation or elsewhere) to full-time positions in sports or media. Examples of this sort help bloggers rationalize their present work circumstances and ascribe promise to developments at SB Nation and in sports blogging more generally.

Phil: You know, there are plenty of people in my circle of acquaintances that went from unpaid, independent blogger to paid sportswriter of some sort. [One] works for ESPN. [Another] works for Outlaws.com now and is an employee of the Outlaws organization. And there are lots of other—of those kinds of stories. So, yes, there’s certainly the feeling that this could be—that this is a portfolio of work that could get me a job somewhere else.

Sports bloggers have the luxury of loosely pursuing these sorts of occupational hopes. Since immediate compensation from SB Nation is limited, most need day jobs or some other form of support to start blogging for the network in the first place. In other words, they won’t starve if their blogging does not “turn into something else.” Moreover, SB Nation bloggers already derive great non-monetary value from sports blogging in the form of socially
recognized self-realization. If they do not parlay their blogging into future work, it is not as though it was a devastating loss.

Tim: You know, when I was mentioning papers and being on TV, getting on the radio and all that, you know, that’s just all a side benefit. If that stuff doesn’t happen that’s perfectly fine. I mean I’ve been doing this [for several years]. So, you know, it’s not like, you know, I need it. It’s not like I ever set a plan to say, “I need to be here in five years, otherwise this has all been a waste of time”—not at all.

These hope labor dynamics, paired with those of socially recognized self-realization, are particularly productive for SB Nation. Bloggers are eager to carry out the type of work that will attract and engage users. Not only do they derive great personal and social value from doing so, they also put themselves in a better position (at least theoretically) for securing employment opportunities work “down the road.” Moreover, bloggers are willing to engage in this work labor costs conducive to the network’s economic logic—the cost-effective sale of user-communities to advertisers. Hope labor, in short, complements the network’s structural imperative quite well. Kuehn’s (2011: 222) observation about power relations at Yelp! also holds true for SB Nation: “[I]n the pursuit of recognition, hope labor continues to produce value for a site that materially benefits above and beyond what it returns.”

The relationship between (1) limited compensation for blogging and (2) the structure and logic of SB Nation was not lost on some of the bloggers. This is to say that SB Nation bloggers are not ‘dupes;’ they acknowledge that the potential fruits of their hope labor rise and fall with SB Nation, but that SB Nation’s commercial success is premised on free labor. Phil described these dynamics as a “pyramid scheme”:
Phil: [I]t doesn’t work unless you have a certain amount of free or very, very cheap content. The SB Nation model is predicated to some extent on user-generated content. But I’m one of the guys that’s in early, so I would be, you know—. If the model continues to grow and it continues to be—. And there becomes a large revenue stream from the advertising, I would stand to be one of the people that might benefit from that as well.

Mike: [SB Nation needs] to figure out a way to make money first, but then once they do, I hope they come up with a way to better compensate their talent, because the talent is woefully undercompensated.

Section summary

Socially recognized self-realization and hope labor may not account for all of SB Nation bloggers’ content production motivations; however, each offers a helpful means of understanding why SB Nation bloggers create content and build communities for little-to-no direct monetary compensation. As Tim said—without mentioning compensation—“Ever since [joining SB Nation] the site has grown magnificently, in terms of content, in terms of personal growth, and—just as importantly—traffic.” It is through producing content for (and community with) fellow fans that bloggers derive personal satisfaction and the social recognition of peers. It is also through these practices, though, that bloggers gain publishing experience and exposure—scarce resources they believe will help them gain employment in the media or sports industries … someday.

In the linked and very visible arenas of action created by the Internet, participants hoping for employment, or simply wanting to express themselves and earn the respect
of their peers, are actively solicited by corporations bent on commandeering their skills and engagement. (Murdock, 2011: 28)

5.3 Routine sports blogging

While SB Nation bloggers don't run the immediate risk of being fired for not meeting deadlines or quotas (as journalists do), they do operate under their own pressures and constraints (albeit primarily socio-cultural). In their pursuit of socially recognized self-realization, bloggers are motivated to produce content regularly and frequently; to publish posts with analytical depth; and to engage in and manage the sports chatter in their blog-communities. These practices take time, and, indeed, bloggers regularly identified a lack of time as key constraint on their work. The following section explores the time constraints under which bloggers operate and the work routines bloggers use to make their practice manageable. Following Fishman (1980), this study argues that much can be learned about SB Nation’s structure, organization, and standard fare by attending to bloggers’ routines.

Assembly-time: Internal and external constraints on blog production

Some of the time constraints on sports bloggers derive from the contradictions of trying to satisfy normative conceptions of fandom through blogging. For instance, efforts to post content regularly and frequently can come at the expense of rich analysis (and vice-versa). Interviewees acknowledged these contradictory demands on their time. Stephen, for instance, said that if he had the time, he would do “more in-depth type writing”—"more long-form high end analysis." He added, "[P]eople really respond well to those stories when I do have time to do them. But they are—. That’s easily two hours of work on one story.”

Bloggers’ practices are also carried out under the constraints of other personal and professional commitments, including family, school, and work. As Eric said, “[T]his is a
truth about blogging that can be forgotten: people have personal lives too. Funny, I know, but life does exist!” Likewise, Stephen said that, “[In] almost every case [bloggers] are doing another thing for a living. So they’re blogging on top of something else, whatever that something else is, it is taking precedent in their lives.” Participants regularly noted that personal and professional responsibilities circumscribed the time available to work on their blogs.

*C.J.*: I’m going to be a little busy with the family stuff tomorrow too, so I’m not sure—. I will set up my game thread and everything, but I’m not sure how much I’ll be able to do throughout the day.

*Chris*: I’m never going to allow my blogging efforts to interfere with my job or my family. They’re always gonna come first. So if that means I can’t write or I can’t watch the game or whatever, so be it. This isn’t my job. I’m not getting paid. So, you know ...

Among the personal and professional commitments that circumscribe blogging, day jobs are particularly interesting in that SB Nation's business model produces this very time constraint. Because most SB Nation bloggers are minimally compensated (if at all) they need to have a day job (or some other form of support like family, student loans, government) if they are to blog for the network for any extended period of time. Sports blog production, then, must operate around work, forcing blogging to compete for time with other personal, social, and leisure pursuits.

*James*: Yeah, time is kind of a big constraint ... when I was working a full-time job while I was doing this, you kind of—. You feel like your writing suffers a little bit because you don’t have the time to dedicate to your posts.
Mike: Well you don’t get paid really, so the most challenging [thing] I think is—.

You know, this isn’t your day job, so if you’ve got a long day at work, and you've got a dinner meeting or a date—. You get home at midnight, and then you realize, “Oh shit, I gotta write my blog for tonight.” You know? And getting up for that every night is really tough.

For some bloggers, though, their jobs provide affordances that make assembly-time a more flexible process. Mike, like several other bloggers, does most of his posting at night; however, he checks news at work. If there’s breaking news I may comment on it in the middle of the day … . I’m my own boss. I can do whatever the hell I want.” Of the bloggers with full-time jobs, C.J., who worked in local government, did the most monitoring of the sports world and content creation while “on the clock” at his day job:

[A] lot of times I can sit down at my computer during the day. I’ll be at my office and I can flip through and keep up on stuff … There are times that I’m in the office that I can do a post, I can work a post over, I can finish one that I might have started the night before … I usually do a lot of game threads at lunch.

For SB Nation bloggers, then, assembly-time can be understood as the patterns by which bloggers produce content and manage their blog-communities despite the internal contradictions of fan-blogging and the external constraints of other personal and professional commitments. Like other media workers, SB Nation bloggers employ routines to make production processes manageable. Blogging’s routinization was apparent in this project's short, daily interviews, as bloggers recounted reasonably similar production practices, day after day. Interviewees readily acknowledged that they made use of production routines, and
each was able to provide detailed descriptions of those routines. Take, for instance, Tim and Eric’s accounts of their day-to-day production practices:

Tim: Generally, every day I get up at 6:30 or so—go to work. I work from 7:30 to 4:00, and I get home at about 4:30. Basically when I get home one or two things happen. If it’s a game night, like tonight, for example, I come home, and I prepare a game thread ... If it’s a home game, I’ll go to the game, watch it, and then when I come back—. I’ll come home and write the recap, just as I come home at about 10:30 or so. That takes me an hour or an hour-and-a-half, depending on how much I have to say, which is usually a lot. So I usually get the recap done by around 11:30 to 12:15 a.m., at which point I go to bed and repeat the process. If it’s a road game, like tonight, just as the game will end—since I’m not going to be travelling home ... I just start writing the recap then and there, and I get it done about an hour earlier. As far as non-game days, it depends on what the schedule has. Usually on the non-game days, like yesterday ... I come home from work, after 4:30, I eat a little dinner, and then I just get up and write. If the next day is a game, then I write a preview for the next day. So that’s pretty much my day-to-day function.

Eric: I got up this morning and looked over the paper with my morning coffee. Yes, I still read newsprint. I scanned the sports section while trying to think up what to write for my preview. I tend to have a self-imposed deadline on game-days. After I was done with the paper and the rest of my morning routine, I came on the computer, checked personal stuff in e-mail and on Facebook, and then moved on to start chipping away at the preview for today’s game.
Event-time: The predictable patterns of play

What's interesting about Tim and Eric’s accounts is not only the conscious routinization of practices, but extent to which event-time determines those routines. Yes, working, eating, and sleeping structure blogwork in fundamental ways; however, the patterns by which sports events and information unfold also enable and constrain bloggers’ practices. Like Tim and Eric, every interviewee explained his work routines in terms of game days and off-days (or non-game days). The game day/off-day distinction is crucial for bloggers in that the presence or absence of a game fundamentally shapes the availability and nature of news and information about their team on a given day. Sports events, sports media coverage, and sports information constitute the raw materials, so to speak, of SB Nation bloggers' posts, and on off-days, those raw materials can be fewer and further between. This places constraints on bloggers’ abilities to produce content regularly and frequently, or to do so with the same analytical depth associated with game analysis; there can simply be less to talk about on an off-day.

Mike: [T]he biggest challenge is coming up with new content. You know fortunately in the NBA you’ve got three or four games a week to cover, so at least you have an event. But coming up with content in between those games is very difficult.

C.J.: I mean I had time at lunch [to write a post]. I just pretty much didn’t have any ideas for a blog, and there wasn’t—. Being the first off-day after a [road] game, a lot of times the beat writers don’t—either the team doesn’t practice or the beat writers might not get down there because they travel, and there’s not a lot of information coming out, you know.
With the exception of amateur drafts and periods of free agency, bloggers pointed out similar constraints in their efforts to produce content throughout the off-season. Indeed, interviewees identified the “dead time” of the off-season as a particularly taxing period.

_C.J._: [Producing content during the off season] is one of the biggest challenges for us. And the thing is, last year was probably one of the biggest NBA summers ever ‘cause you had all the free agency … So, I mean there was stuff to write about, but there’s still dead time built in there.

_Aaron_: Most of the summer, besides the exception of that big [traffic] boom [associated with the NBA draft] and whatever other off-season [player] movement there might be, most of the summer gets—. It’s pretty tough. I slow down posting a little bit. I try to post at least once a day, but I don’t always keep up with that … I’m sort of grasping at straws to find something to write about every day.

Compared to off-days and the off-season, game days come with their own set of pressures and constraints. Most importantly, bloggers reiterate that games _must_ be written about and in a timely manner. On game days, SB Nation bloggers typically publish at least a game preview a few hours before the game starts, a game thread for community discussion during the event, and a recap after the game concludes. Publishing a game thread is not particularly taxing; it is little more than a placeholder for the community's conversation. Previews and recaps, however, are top priorities that are time consuming and time sensitive. As Stephen explained, "You know, the previews and recaps, those just have to be done. There’s no shifting them." Likewise, Phil described previews and recaps as, "[priorities] 1 and 1a.” These game-day publishing expectations are less a product of SB Nation’s (loosely enforced) policies and more a product of the personal and social pressures of fan-blogging.
As Chris explains, a blogger who fails to produce content in association with a game sends a message to readers that he doesn't care about his team:

Certainly the game recap is a mandatory … I’ve found that if a blog isn’t doing that at the bare minimum, there’s really no reason to come back to read it. Because if you’re not going to even care about, you know, the most essential thing—which is the team actually playing games—the person is only going to be as interested as the writer himself. So that’s gotta be first priority.

After game coverage, the second most important priority for SB Nation bloggers is passing along any breaking news from the sports world. By definition, breaking news is unpredictable; however, it is also highly valued by sports audiences, SB Nation bloggers, and the company. Phil, for instance, explained that “trades, injuries—that sort of thing … are things that absolutely have to be covered … If there is something that happens—. If a trade happens, then the goal is to get something posted ASAP”. The relative unpredictability of breaking news produces challenges for SB Nation bloggers in their efforts to pass along or opine on these developments in a timely manner, though. With the constraints of graduate school and family commitments, Phil explained that “his reality” doesn’t “sync up real well” with the expectation that breaking news be published “ASAP.” Similarly, C.J. pointed out that his day job constrains his ability to monitor the sports world for breaking news:

I’ve got to go to work, and I’m not going to sit down at a computer for the rest of the day, and I’m probably not going to look at my phone. So if anything breaking happens, I’m going to probably miss it.

Despite these challenges, SB Nation bloggers do employ routines for making manageable their coverage of game days, off-days, off seasons and breaking news—for
gearing their practices to the way these sports events and related information flows unfold. These processes will be discussed in the following sections. First, though, it is necessary to highlight one further “sphere of activity” to which SB Nation bloggers must gear their practices—that of the audience.

**Audience-time: Publish early, publish often**

Interviews with SB Nation bloggers revealed that assembly-time and event-time were not the only temporal sources of pressures and constraints under which bloggers work. Since they are motivated to have posts read, engaged with, and shared (for both socially recognized self-realization and the hope of future employment), bloggers aim to publish content in conjunction with readers’ temporal patterns of Internet use. These patterns are referred to here as “audience-time,” and efforts to tailor publishing to audience-time structure bloggers’ practices in important ways.

SB Nation bloggers aim to produce content at the times of day when sports fans are most likely to consume that content. A network best practices document recommends “having a post up first thing every morning and then at least another post in the middle of the day leading into game time (if your team is in season)” ("SB Nation blogger best practices," 2008). Where the afternoon posts help fans prepare for a game, the logic of morning post, as interviewees explained, was to have content available for readers when they get to the office and begin their workday.

*Chris:* I try to have something up by, you know, like nine in the morning or something like that. Because I guess I tend to think in terms of the readers that might come to our—might be professionals who are just checking the Internet during their workday or something like that. So then I think about, “well, when would they be
doing that?” Well they’d probably be doing that right when they come in to work, you
know, check the sports scores. They might be doing that at lunch. They might be
doing that during a coffee break. And so I try to time it so that posts go up in those
time intervals.

Phil: A lot of this is driven by—. Blog readership occurs, you know, at work in the
office—Monday through Friday at work in the office. And so I want things there for 8
or 9 a.m. when people are arriving. Now my readership—. I’ve got lots of people on
the East Coast. I’ve got people in Europe. I’ve got people in Australia, but obviously
much smaller readership than the people [here]. So I usually gear my thinking
towards West Coast time, so it’s always—. I want something out there by 8 a.m. at
the latest.

While interviewees said that they paid limited attention to pageviews, industry
research suggests that they and the network are smart in gearing publishing to high traffic
time periods, particularly the beginning of the workday. As of February 2010, Internet usage
peaked at 7:00 p.m. with more than 40% of people using the Internet at that time; however,
usage also crested in the morning between 7:00 a.m. and 10:00 a.m.—the only time of day
during which Internet use outstripped TV viewership ("SB Nation blogger best practices,"
2008) (Zimbalist, 2010). Moreover, studies of "cyberslacking" suggest that young, well-
educated men in high-status industries are most likely to use the Internet for personal
purposes at work (Vitak, Crouse, & LaRose, 2008). This, of course, is the exact demographic
SB Nation aims to reach and manufacture for advertisers.

Time-of-day considerations are not new to the media industries, of course. Television
and radio broadcasters have long constructed their schedules to coincide with the viewing
patterns of the general audience and specific demographics (Napoli, 2003). Likewise, the newspaper industry’s bygone era of twice-daily publishing aimed to put papers in commuters hands before and after work (Fishman, 1980).

Web publishing affords content production at whatever pace and intervals the writer desires; however, among the SB Nation bloggers interviewed here, the independent operation of these three spheres of activity—assembly-, event-, and audience-time—meant that bloggers still operated under daily story quotas and deadlines akin to that of traditional journalists. The quotas are a product of daily publishing expectations shared by the bloggers, the audience, and the network—expectations that are heightened on game days. Deadlines are a function of time-sensitive sporting events, the desire to publish content at the times readers are most likely to see it, and the constraints of personal and professional obligations. The following sections outline some of the important ways bloggers routinize their work to deal with the pressures and constraints of blogging amid these three independent spheres.

**Planning and time shifting**

To the extent that planning is possible, SB Nation bloggers plan their work to make it manageable. This process was apparent when, at the end of each interview, I asked for a convenient time to call the next day and whether the blogger would have posted content by that point in the day.

*C.J.:* Just looking at my schedule, on what I’ve got written down here. I will be recapping tonight’s game, and I will be writing the game thread for the Sixty-Sixes [versus] Panthers tomorrow night. So yeah, it’ll be at least two posts up by the time we talk tomorrow …
James: Yeah, I have—. Thursday morning I’ll have something up, and Friday morning as well, and Friday night I’ll have ‘em—. I’m doing like our daily links thing on Thursday, and I’m gonna do some commentary, aside from just posting links. We’ll have some commentary on there …

C.J. and James' accounts illustrate the extent to which some SB Nation's bloggers plan their content production practices. More specifically, C.J. and James' accounts show how SB Nation's daily bloggers plan their work. Each plans his production processes within workdays (e.g., "morning", "afternoon", and "night"), as well as across days ("on Thursday", "then Friday"). Indeed, each interviewee employed a scheduling system of one sort or another for rationalizing and routinizing work within and across days. The highly structured organization of the commercial sports world, with its regularly scheduled events and associated information flows, makes this degree of planning possible. Indeed, this characteristic of commercial sports has made sports attractive to rationalizing media firms for some time. The benefit of being able to plan is obvious. The blogger can head off conflicts between these spheres of activity.

Mike: I have to do the Bulldog game on Tuesday night, which means I’ve got to write a preview tomorrow night and I have to recap it after the game Tuesday night. Which means I’ll probably write a [links] piece tonight for tomorrow morning.

T.C.: It sounds like you’ve got a relatively organized schedule for these postings. Do you find it makes going about this process easier?

Mike: Yeah, because then I know—. I don’t schedule conflicts during the week.

Importantly, though, the ability to plan both within and across days presents opportunities for further rationalization of the editorial process through time shifting. Within
a given day, for instance, bloggers can write content and then schedule it to go “live” hours later—at the times when readers are most likely to check their RSS, Twitter, or Facebook feeds. Thus, even if a blogger doesn’t have time to work on a post while readers are getting to work, with some preparation he can ensure that they have something to read anyways.

A similar logic applies to the pre-writing of content across days. C.J. noted, for instance, that when he anticipates being swamped at work, he looks at his schedule and the team’s schedule and “if at all possible” he tries to write a post in advance. Sports’ unpredictability places real limits, though, on this sort of pre-writing and time-shifting, as does bloggers’ normative conceptions of their practice:

*Tim*: I don’t write a preview in advance unless it’s the next day. So this way my attention and my focus is solely on what those teams have been doing because you don’t know that in a couple days somebody could get injured, somebody could get hurt, there could be a change on the team, somebody could get hot, somebody could get cold. Matters change and as a result you can’t just go and prepare for that. I know, you know, it makes things easier, but at the same time, would it make the previews a lot less what people have come to expect and appreciate at On The Prowl. What’s important is that it’s not like the newspapers where they do write stuff in advance and therefore everything is very by the book, by the numbers, which is useful but it gives no additional information

**Division of Labor**

A closely related way in which bloggers address the pressures and constraints of their work is by creating a staff of writers or community moderators to divide labor. Stephen, with his management role within the network, estimated that 80% of the network's blogs are
collaborative. Mike, who had just added a third co-writer before participating in this project, explained that having the help made his blogging much more manageable: "I look back at the fact that I used to carry this blog all by myself—I could never do that again."

Indeed, among the nine interviewees for this research, only Phil managed his blog as a solo project. He explained that blogging regularly and frequently was, at times, a taxing process: “[A]s a guy that has been, you know, the main blogger—the sole blogger—for [several] seasons, the challenge is staying motivated. It’s sometimes hard to write every day or every game or whatever. You’re looking at yourself saying, ‘Why am I doing this again?’”

In the months following our interviews, Phil addressed this challenge by adding two other people to his blog's editorial staff.

Dividing labor also allows for each team member to pursue a degree of specialization. Interviewees noted that some team members focused on producing specific types of posts (e.g., daily links, recaps, updates on prospects) or they carried out specific community management tasks (e.g., approving new members; moderating comments). Tim’s staff included a writer that focused on exclusively on the club’s junior-level prospects and another that produced the blog’s daily links posts.

Blogging as a team can also help ensure that someone is keeping an eye on the community and the news when the lead blogger can’t. This means that a blogger can go on a vacation without worrying about his community withering. The same logic also applies at the daily level, too. C.J. explained that when he was recruited from his previous blog to his current SB Nation blog, it was understood that he would be posting during the day since his co-writer's day job didn't afford him the same opportunity.
Care should be exercised, though, in characterizing SB Nation’s blogs as particularly rigid or hierarchal divisions of labor. Mike, for instance, described a relatively democratic and 'flat' organization of work at his blog:

Mike: I think all three of us are the same. We’re all writer-editors, and we edit each other. You know, we check each other for grammar, fact-finding, things like that.

We’re all writer-editors. I mean, if you were to line us up in number of importance, I guess I’d be the first because I founded the blog, but we all share the load.

Some SB Nation bloggers may be reluctant to share editorial privileges with other bloggers, though. A SB Nation lead blogger is often the founder of that blog, and he tends to have a great deal of personal investment and ownership in the blog. Expanding permissions to the front page entails ceding a degree of control over the tone and direction of their blog. Indeed, this study’s lone solo blogger, Phil explained:

I guess, part of it is, I’ve never felt the need or the desire to give up what I’ve been doing. It’s my baby, and it’s my thing, and I’ve been happy with it that way. So that’s a big part of it, is that I haven’t been wanting to share the responsibility, share the load. It’s my creation.

The company recognizes the attachment lead bloggers can have for their sites, but it insists that bloggers can benefit from dividing labor. President Tyler Bleszinski says, "I know how hard it is to let go and trust someone else with your site but if you're smart about choosing teammates then you needn't worry about your blog" ("Best practices: Increasing posting frequency," 2009).

SB Nation, as a network, undoubtedly benefits from having the front page content of its blog-communities produced by a team rather than an individual blogger. In the network's
best practices document for "Increasing Posting Frequency," the first recommendation is to "Build a Team." Obviously, it is easier for a team of bloggers to generate frequent content than it is for an individual blogger to do so. Further, Bleszinski's points out that team-blogging can “eliminate competition for eyeballs” if it involves teaming up with competitors. It can also give popular community members' work a dedicated, more visible spot on the front page. Moreover, unlike firm or market-based production systems, where adding new content producers would presumably necessitate an increase in labor costs, the inclination among SB Nation bloggers toward uncompensated social production means that the network's team-specific blogs can build their editorial staffs without necessarily increasing their editorial labor costs. Tim, who recruited four authors from within his blog-community, explained that the addition of those authors to his blog added no labor costs for him or the network—those authors were willing to contribute content on the blog's front page for no additional compensation.

Tim: Incidentally, I don’t pay any of them, because On The Prowl gets fifty bucks a month, and when I asked them how much of that they wanted they all said, “none” ...
I assure you they have documented that they [laughs] didn’t want any money. I guess I can’t blame them, since I can’t imagine they would want five bucks a month.

**Burdens of abundance and beat streams**

The standard fare of sports blogs can be understood (in part) by examining the routine methods sports bloggers use to create content. Some SB Nation bloggers write about the teams they cover by attending live sporting events and offering their accounts of the team’s play. Some also interview athletes, coaches, and other persons of sporting interest, like the team’s beat reporter. A growing segment is credentialed, with their reportorial orientation
falling somewhere between establishment journalist and unapologetic fan. Each of these blogging approaches are important, but their texts are not the network’s standard fare. The vast majority of SB Nation’s content is produced through some variation on the following process: bloggers consume sports media, including televised events, news, and information, and, drawing on that consumption, they produce their own sports news and opinion for their communities and for a broader audience. Specific approaches surely differ from blogger to blogger based on voice and the blogger’s fan identity (among other factors); however, a fundamental commonality among virtually all of this content is its basis in bloggers’ sports media consumption. Without consuming mediated sports, SB Nation bloggers cannot create the posts they create. Sometimes a post’s basis in sports media consumption is subtle, like when a game recap draws on a blogger’s impressions of a televised game. Other times the post’s basis in sports media consumption is explicit, like when a blogger passes along to readers a link to another outlet’s news story, adding his own brief description and comment. Or, when a blogger compiles a daily links post with links to news, blog posts, videos, Twitter updates, and any other web content relevant to the team. In aggregating links to media content in either of these ways, the blog’s reliance on outside media content is most visible. Indeed, at many SB Nation blogs, these sorts of aggregative posts dominate the front page.

The main point here is this: virtually all of the content produced by SB Nation bloggers depends on bloggers’ sports media consumption. In this, any exploration of SB Nation’s organization, its bloggers’ practices, or the resulting content is incomplete without attending to the ways in which bloggers expose themselves to the media content that is the basis for their posts. Just as beat reporters cannot produce news from sources they don’t talk
to, so too are SB Nation bloggers unable to create news and opinion based on media content they did not read, see, or hear.

Aside from watching live and televised games, bloggers rely very heavily on the Internet to gather news and information relevant to their team. This might include breaking news like injuries or trades that are of the utmost priority. It might also include, reports filed by the local beat reporter, commentary from a national columnist, YouTube videos featuring players, or other blogs’ commentary about a game. Chris simply used the catch-all characterization of “current events.” The main thing the blogger needs to do is get the information out to reader as quickly as possible.

Chris: We want to get at least a brief summary up or at least a link or something like that so that it will show up either on Twitter or in a Google reader or an RSS feed, to let readers know that that’s current events and its not something that they have to wait on to find out. And that’s typically pretty easy to do. You can put something like that together, you know, in five minutes, so that at least readers are aware of it.

While a post like this might be easy to put together, the challenge is that the blogger doesn’t always know when or where this sort of news and information is going to be available. As an experienced and avid sports fans, though, the blogger knows that some outlets are more likely than others to publish news and information relevant to the team, and those outlets may have regular features that he can regularly rely on for fresh news. In a process very similar to the journalistic beat, then, SB Nation bloggers make sure to check out these likely sources for news and information about the team on a daily basis. Like Aaron, each blogger had his own list of sites that he simply had to check every day.
Aaron: I mean I check out each of the beat reporters’ sites … I check out each of those every day to catch up on the news articles. I visit all of the other Mustangs blogs pretty much every day. And, you know, the major basketball blogs like Yahoo!

However, Aaron explains that he doesn’t go individually from site to site, typing in the URL and checking to see if the outlet has published any news about the team in the last couple of hours. Instead, Aaron uses Twitter to keep himself abreast of any news and information about the team: “Twitter’s responsible for a lot of the reading I do, because I follow all the same people whose websites I visit, so when they update on Twitter, I immediately click the link.” Thus, Twitter functions for Aaron as a crucial tool: he centralizes his news and information gathering processes; he avoids redundant trips to a media outlet’s site; and he’s ensured to stay abreast of developments as soon as they occur. Other bloggers also saw the logic in using personalized news aggregators like Twitter and RSS for these purposes. Indeed, while a platform like Twitter is commonly seen as a space for distributing news and information, SB Nation bloggers recognized that the platform is just as important (if not more important) in their news and information gathering processes.

James: Yeah, Twitter—big-time. I think both ways, as far as—. I mean we promote our blog on Twitter … Every time we post, we have a link to it on Twitter that goes automatically through SB Nation. I started using Twitter, I think like a year ago, as one of my primary sources for getting NBA news for myself—it’s fantastic.

Aaron: I definitely use Twitter. I use it both to post my own stuff and share my own thoughts, and also to keep track of, you know, beat reporters and other bloggers and stuff.
Gathering news and information from beat writers was a particular point of attention among bloggers. By ensuring quick and constant access to any reports from beat writers, bloggers are able to stay informed about the day-to-day goings on of the team even if that blogger doesn't have the resources or access to join the team in the same capacity.

Five of this study’s nine bloggers used Twitter for information gathering purposes, as did two who used Google RSS Reader. The two that didn’t use these news aggregators did have their own systems for efficiently monitoring the sports world for news and information. Mike explained: “basically I just use Google Chrome. I set up about ten different tabs [laughs]: one’s on Yahoo! Sports; one’s on ESPN; one’s on HoopsSite; one’s on HoopsWorld … And that’s how I follow what’s going on.” Phil, on the other hand, taps into the ongoing filtering process that is his community’s discussions to find news and develop post ideas: “They usually find it about as quickly and they do a better job of filtering.”

Beyond just passing along news and information, C.J. pointed out that he develops post ideas from perusing his Google RSS Reader.

I’ve got a pretty extensive RSS collection in my Google reader account. And I use those to get post ideas. You know, if somebody says something about the Sixty-Sixes, and I see it during the day, I’ll star it. You know, I’ll come back to it later, put a post up, link, quote, and what I think about it a lot of times. Do I think they’re on to something? And I’ll elaborate on it. Or do I think they missed the boat, and I’ll put that up there.

In short, SB Nation participants in this study drew heavily on aggregators and aggregator-like processes to gather information and develop ideas that would be the basis for their blogging. It is also important to consider, though, what sources they sought to aggregate
news and information from. Bloggers highlighted the opportunity to follow the work of a team’s beat reporters as an important incentive of aggregation. Mike explained that he always links to the beat writers pieces—“always. Everything they write.” By following the team’s beat reporters on Twitter, Tim was able to more rapidly gather information from beat writers’ reports and pass it along to readers.

[T]he beat reporters—who are the real drivers of news for the Wildcats—you know, they Tweet as well. So whenever they get information I can immediately take that and say, “Hey guys,” just before the game begins, “This guy’s gonna start in net,” which is important news that, at the same time, doesn’t require, you know, you having to wait for a big post … You get the information and you pass it along.

In the aggregation process, SB Nation bloggers have the opportunity to tailor the types of sources in their daily media diet, and, thus, the types of media content they’re more or less likely to create for the public. This study didn’t look specifically at which media outlets a blogger was “following” through aggregation; however, in listening to bloggers describe their daily links posts (presumably built on the links the blogger found through aggregation), one can get a sense for the sources these bloggers consider most important.

Mike: Well, the regular resources—there’s a very limited rotation. So you’re always looking for something on either ESPN, Yahoo!, NBA.com, hoopsworld, hoopshype—although they’re pretty much just and aggregator themselves. And you try to find content related to the Nuggets from those sites.

Chris: I’m always going to link to the other beat reporters and the other blog—the Tiger Tracks blog that operates through ESPN True Hoop. I’m always going to link to their game summaries because they’re the authoritative voices that need to be read
by everybody, including myself. So those are always going to be high priority to get links. So that’s standard. Then I’m going to look at sort of a greater league perspective—see if the some of the national writers have commented on the game, guys like John Hollinger, some of the main ESPN guys. And then I’ll look for some random, like human-interest stories.

Section Summary

This section sought to understand the routines bloggers use to make content and the pressures and constraints that necessitate those routines. The section looked first at the three independent temporal spheres that bloggers must orient their work to: assembly-, event-, and audience-time. In their efforts to bring a degree of synchronicity to these three independent spheres bloggers adopt routines that help them manage these independent processes. They take advantage of time shifting, divide labor, and rely on aggregated news diets in attempts to accomplish their work. These practices have textual implications, though, which will be explored in chapter 6.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION: THE ENABLING AND CONSTRAINING STRUCTURES OF NETWORKED SPORTS BLOGGING

Key Findings

In the business press, news industry analysts offered SB Nation as a normative example for the industry—a news organization other news organizations should look to for guidance. For instance, with the commercial viability of hyper-local news very much uncertain, GigaOM’s Mathew Ingram (2010: para. 5) asked: “Is there anything that broader news-oriented sites like [AOL’s] Patch … can learn from SB Nation?” Elsewhere, Wired’s Tim Carmody (2011: para. 29) surmised that SB Nation—with its coveted demographic and slick platform—“might be the best indicator of where news is going in the 2010s.” Investors seem to have agreed with Carmody; in March 2012, Vox/SB Nation secured its fourth and largest venture capital infusion to date. The $17 million investment round brought the company’s total financing to $40.5 million since October 2008 (Takahashi, 2012).

How can this sort of investment be explained, and what does this investment tell us about the allocation of resources at SB Nation? This study’s structural biography considered whether SB Nation’s resource allocation reflected the instrumental control of investors or the structural constraints of advertiser-supported media on the web. Some SB Nation investors could stand to benefit from influencing the company’s resource allocation. Ted Leonsis, for instance, has an interest in seeing SB Nation blogs generate ample media attention for his sports franchises. And Comcast has an interest in complementing its various sports media holdings with SB Nation’s low-cost sports commentary and community discussions.

SB Nation’s allocative choices better reflect the structural constraints of advertiser-supported media on the web than the investment interests of owners like Leonsis and
Comcast, though. Like many web 2.0 companies, the network relies on the sale of prosumers to advertisers to generate the bulk of its revenue; doing so is a structural imperative. Companies that can cost-effectively facilitate prosumption by the web’s most demogenic users stand to capture handsome revenues from corporate advertisers. In light of this, SB Nation organized its blog-communities around men’s commercial sports teams, and it focused its investment efforts on developing a scalable platform that bloggers were excited to use—indeed, they had participated in its design. Through these processes, SB Nation put powerful, attractive publishing tools in the hands of advertisers’ most coveted demographic—young, affluent, tech-savvy males. With these tools, SB Nation’s bloggers and users grew the network, manufacturing themselves and other users as a marketable prosumer commodity. Vox/SB Nation’s $40.5 million in venture capital investment reflects the company’s success in cost-effectively facilitating this process.

SB Nation’s structure produces a dynamic set of power relations between the network and its bloggers and users. On the one hand, the network decides what sports and teams to dedicate blogs to; it selects the lead bloggers that will write and manage those blog-communities; and it provides those bloggers with the tools to create content and manage their communities. These are the points at which the network exerts the most control over the organization and output of production at SB Nation blogs. On the other hand, in relying on un- or under-compensated bloggers to create content in their spare time, the network cedes control over certain aspects of that process. Without the leverage of a pink slip, SB Nation bloggers enjoy considerable autonomy in deciding what and how to write about their teams, and the network must be flexible with its quotas and deadlines. Indeed, when the network has
“overstepped its bounds” by introducing unreasonable story quotas or commercializing its editorial content, it has received pushback from bloggers and users.

Despite these contradictions, in producing content as fans for purposes of socially recognized self-realization, bloggers’ practices largely align with the network’s interests: they produce content regularly and frequently, driving traffic back to their blogs; they offer rich analytical depth, keeping information-hungry fans on the site; and they engage other users in sports chatter, creating the network’s conversational environment. Their orientations toward fandom and journalism may not afford them journalistic access, but this is of limited consequence if they can just as effectively build their audiences by drawing on their fan perspective. Further, as trusted and respected members of their blog-communities, these lead bloggers provide the network its entry-point for introducing advertisers’ brands to users through sponsored posts. In short, SB Nation’s limited compensation structure means that it cedes some control over the production process to the network’s bloggers; however, in doing so, bloggers create content as fans in ways that tend to align with the network’s commercial interests.

In their efforts to produce content as fans, for fans, SB Nation bloggers do face pressures and constraints. Since most have to work day jobs to support themselves, blogging competes for time with personal and professional obligations. Bloggers employ work routines that help them negotiate the temporal discontinuities between their production processes (assembly-time), that of the sports world (event-time), and that of their readers (audience-time). Specifically, participants noted strategies for dividing labor, scheduling their blogging, and using news aggregators to monitor the sports world.
Implications of the Model

As a case study of production processes at a single sports blog network, these findings are not necessarily generalizable to other online communities. This is particularly so at the micro-level, where the history and culture of local communities should not be discounted. If Ingram (2010) and Carmody (2011) are correct, though, in suggesting that Vox/SB Nation represents an emerging, normative model for news media, then the prosumer manufacture process described above may, in fact, become increasingly generalizable. In other words, if platforms or networks like SB Nation are looked to as promising, profitable commercial models, we should not be surprised to see other news organizations similarly allocate their resources—to the facilitation of prosumption by demogenic users that are passionate about a topic. Indeed, to the extent that this model successfully attracts corporate advertising dollars, investors will presumably direct financing toward companies like SB Nation rather than alternative organizational structures.

The relative viability of different commercial media structures has implications for the types of media texts that are produced for public consumption. The following section explores the implications of SB Nation’s organizational structure for coverage of women’s sports.

Commercial, networked sports blogging and women’s sports

What is the relationship between the organization of blogwork at SB Nation and the marginalization of women’s sports on the network’s blogs? This is an important question for critical media studies in that marginalization and trivialization of women’s sports in the media reinforce assumptions in the broader culture about gender difference and female inferiority (Duncan, 2006; Messner, 2002)
While women’s sports receive limited coverage on SB Nation blogs, they are not completely absent from the network’s coverage. The SB Nation’s tennis page, for instance, reports on the Women’s Tennis Association tour, and dedicated blogs cover both the Ladies Professional Golf Association tour and figure skating. Women’s college basketball is covered across the network’s intercollegiate athletic program blogs, albeit not to the same extent as men’s basketball, much less football. Some of the network’s 20 local sites also produce recaps and game threads for those cities’ WNBA teams.

In September 2009, SB Nation also added Swish Appeal—a blog dedicated to the WNBA and women’s college basketball. Each of the blog’s staffers covers a specific WNBA team, and during women’s college basketball season, each staffer covers one or more college teams. According to Quantcast, Swish Appeal attracted roughly 10,000 unique visitors each month between mid-2010 and mid-2012, with traffic jumping to 35,000-45,000 per month during the women’s college basketball tournament each Spring; however, Swish Appeal’s focus on women’s basketball as a whole is decidedly different from the SB Nation’s men’s professional sports blogs, the vast majority of which revolve around a single team men’s team. In fact, the SB Nation network has no blogs focused on specific women’s sports teams. The distinction is important; in focusing on the whole sport of women’s basketball, Swish Appeal contradicts the network’s operating assumption—that sports fans are fans of teams, not sports.

If team allegiances are the way sports fans orient themselves to the sports world, and if online sports communities are most effectively built by drawing on and fomenting those teams allegiances, then why not create blogs for individual women’s professional sports teams, as SB Nation does for men’s pro teams? With its small but sustained growth in
attendance and TV ratings, and the league’s successes with corporate sponsorship, WNBA teams seem like reasonable candidates for their own SB Nation blogs ("Attendance, TV viewership rise again for WNBA," 2011; Lombardo, 2011). Given this, this study’s NBA bloggers were asked for their thoughts on the prospects of launching team-specific WNBA blogs.

Traditionally, commercial newspapers have not allocated beat resources to coverage of women’s sports teams because of a (presumed) lack of reader interest, particularly among young men (Hardin, 2005; Lowes, 1999). SB Nation’s expansion to include blogs for each men’s major league team, reflects the continued importance of attracting desirable demographics; however, with SB Nation’s platform development and advertising sales centralized rather than redundant costs for each blog, the marginal cost of adding a new blog to the network is almost nothing (that is, as long as bloggers are willing to write for little-to-no-pay, like other network bloggers). Because of this, reader interest is—at least theoretically—no longer a barrier to introducing blogs that follow women’s sports or specific women’s sports teams.

Stephen, who has a role in the network’s editorial hierarchy, acknowledged that the low marginal costs of adding blogs to the network means that SB Nation could start blogs for individual women’s sports teams. In explaining the network’s lack of team-specific WNBA blogs, he said that he didn’t perceive any bias within the company toward women’s sports. Instead, he attributed this gap in coverage, first and foremost, to a lack of WNBA writers. “Really, the limitation is writers … I’d love to have an individual team blog for all WNBA teams. There’s not enough writers out there to do that.”
When it comes to creating its team-specific blogs, and staffing those blogs with writers, SB Nation has typically done so by bringing on established blogs and bloggers from elsewhere in the sports blogosphere. This strategy does not bode well for the creation of a league of WNBA team blogs. In recent years, only a handful of WNBA blogs have fit the SB Nation model—team-specific, from a fan perspective, and regularly updated. Where the network has sought to include those team-specific writers in the network, they have been added as Swish Appeal contributors rather than create a team-specific WNBA blog for each team.

While SB Nation could conceivably scour each WNBA team’s fan forums for potential writers, the most fruitful WNBA writer recruitment may come from within the SB Nation network. Indeed, a small number of the network’s NBA bloggers do produce recaps about their city’s WNBA teams during the NBA offseason, either for Swish Appeal or for the network’s local sites. The trouble with looking “in house” for bloggers to cover WNBA teams is that those bloggers need to have both the time and interest to write about those WNBA teams (as is the case for all team-specific blogging). Time constraints are an important deterrent to regular coverage of any topic beyond a blogger’s favorite NBA team; however, WNBA game recaps could help SB Nation NBA bloggers “fill in the gaps” during the NBA off-season.

Interest in women’s sports among sports bloggers is presumably a bigger impediment to finding WNBA writers than time constraints, though. Drawing from a sample of mostly SB Nation bloggers (n=214), Hardin et al. (2012) found that less than a quarter (23%) of sports bloggers think women’s sports have the potential to be as exciting to fans as men’s.
And male bloggers—who make up an estimated 90% of the sports blogosphere—were even less likely to think women’s sports have that potential. As Aaron said:

I don’t know much about the WNBA. I’m a huge basketball fan, and I’m just not somebody that’s especially interested in the WNBA, and I think that describes a lot of basketball fans … I just don’t—. I don’t think there’s enough of a fan base for each WNBA team, or at least for most of them …

Approaching the topic from a gender-neutral position, Stephen argued that the WNBA falls in with a host of men’s sports that, due to a lack of consumer demand, also receive marginal coverage on the network’s blogs:

I see it as the same kind of bias that has me not—has me completely ignoring the [local arena football team and college baseball team] … We almost never talk about it or write about it, because no one cares. It’s a very small market.

Like Aaron and Stephen, other interviewees pointed to limited reader interest as a justification for the WNBA’s non-coverage and as an impediment to team-specific WNBA blogs. Conversely, where participants in this study did see potential for a team-specific WNBA blog, it was for the Seattle Storm, with its rather avid fan base. The importance placed on reader interest is intriguing in that, with SB Nation’s low marginal costs for adding new blogs to the network, reader interest should not throw up barriers to coverage of marginalized sports, even on a team-specific basis. What is really lost if a WNBA team-blog goes unread?

Reader interests (or perceptions thereof) may have continued importance, though, when the motivations of fan-bloggers motivations are considered. Socially recognized self-realization implies, of course, that a bloggers’ peers recognize and appreciate his or her work.
A small audience for one’s writing is, in this sense, a deterrent to blogging about a marginalized sports team, like the WNBA’s. Further, for bloggers hoping to parlay their current writing into employment opportunities down the road, the limited attention afforded to the WNBA makes coverage of its teams an unlikely space to build a networked reputation.

There may be a more practical set of problems impeding the introduction or success of WNBA blogs, though. Blogging regularly and frequently from the fan perspective requires ample media coverage of that team; without media coverage, bloggers have little news to pass along or opine upon. In terms of event coverage, less than 20 WNBA games are broadcast nationally each year, and local games tend to be tucked away on niche cable and satellite stations; however, with its “Live Access” Internet service, the WNBA does make nearly every league game available through live streaming or on demand. WNBA bloggers, then, have regularly televised events that they can provide recaps and analysis of.

Between games, however, bloggers rely on news, information, and opinion from a range of media sources to ensure that they have plenty to talk about, driving readers back to the blog. Here, WNBA bloggers are at a decided disadvantage. The already limited coverage of women’s sports by national and local broadcasters actually shrunk over the past decade (Messner & Cooky, 2010). Moreover, newspapers increasingly eliminate women’s sports beats—a crucial resource for team specific bloggers. With few other WNBA blogs in existence, the league’s team-specific bloggers have far fewer options for linking to others’ notes and commentary. Thus, while live events may be readily covered by WNBA bloggers, the news and opinion that is the basis for much team-blogging is much more elusive for women’s sports than for bloggers covering men’s professional teams. This problem compounds itself during the WNBA off-season, which is longer and less frequently attended
to by the media than are the men’s professional leagues during their off-seasons. As C.J. explained:

That’s a lot of dead time where you’ve got to generate some content. And I mean if you don’t follow some of the European leagues where a lot of [WNBA] players play during the winter months, I think it’d be really tough. You’d end up with the blog sitting there, maybe one post, couple of posts per week.

In fact, when the writer behind the Atlanta Dream blog, Pleasant Dreams decided to shutter that team-specific blog and join Swish Appeal, the challenges of off-season blogging were cited as a key factor.

To summarize, while SB Nation could expand its network to include blogs for specific WNBA teams, a combination of factors discourage it from doing so. These include: attention to advertisers’ demographic demands, the network’s reliance on pre-existing blogs for expansion, bloggers’ motivations for producing content, and the limited coverage afforded women’s sports by traditional media. Hardin et al. point out that the social identities and attitudes of sports bloggers contribute to the blogosphere’s continued marginalization of women’s sports; however, at a commercial sports blog network like SB Nation, these structural and cultural factors also work to impede more egalitarian coverage of men’s and women’s sports. Thus, the gendered, ideological side of sports blog content is not just a product of bloggers’ attitudes, but also the practical constraints of producing sports blogs in a commercial network like SB Nation.

**Directions for future research**

With its attention to economic and cultural processes at different levels of analysis, the present study is necessarily incomplete and begs further attention to specific topics. The
following outlines a few directions for future research that should prove worthwhile for studies of sports blogging and other media production.

First, this study put particular emphasis on the role of fandom in propelling sports bloggers’ content production; however, future research should also consider hope labor as an entry point for exploring the maintenance of networks and the productivity of content creation in contexts—both online and offline. Indeed, the concept’s applicability seems to extend beyond contexts like SB Nation and Yelp! to seemingly disparate areas of knowledge work. Interns are the most obvious example, but academics—and grad students in particular—may find opportunities to interrogate relationships of hope labor in their own (projected) career paths.

Second, news feeds like Twitter and Google’s RSS Reader are important sites for the dissemination and consumption of media. Researchers should also attend to the ways news- and blogworkers are taking up these news aggregators as tools for quickly and efficiently exposing themselves to timely information about their beats. These systems are enabling, allowing news creators to break down time and space. They can create constraints, though, too: disincentivizing “boots on the ground” reporting; privileging immediacy over context; and directing further attention to the status quo’s authoritative sources. A logical extension of this study would be to find out which feeds, specifically, bloggers include in their daily aggregation digest. Such a study could provide an empirical picture of the types of sources and materials that are the basis for bloggers’ subsequent content.

Third, researchers should continue to develop innovative ways for studying new media production processes, even when those processes evade traditional methods for data collection. This project’s daily telephone interviews offered an understanding of bloggers
routines that, if imperfect, still provided access to blog production’s “backstage.” Indeed, while this method made sense for studying sports bloggers, there is no reason it could not also be used to study more traditional newsrooms, and it may be particularly convenient if combined with direct observation. In doing so, the trustworthiness of daily telephone interviews’ self-report data could also be assessed.

Finally, while political economists of culture have tended to focus on impersonal institutions and organizations, the role of labor in cultural production deserves continued attention. This study, for instance, would have provided an outline of SB Nation’s structure had it stayed only at the institutional and organizational levels visible through the trade press. Such a study would have offered few insights, though, into how and why sports bloggers create content for SB Nation. Bloggers’ accounts of their practice were needed to understand these processes. At the same time, studies of content production on the web stands to gain from engaging with political economic frameworks that search for the structural underpinnings for everyday practices. Prosumer manufacture provides, perhaps, the best entry point for attending to both everyday labor and underlying political economic structures in the web 2.0 environment.

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SBNation launches SBNation.com, national sports news, commentary, and discussion site featuring real-time updates on sports news stories told from the fan’s perspective. (2009). AllBusiness.com. Retrieved from


Appendix A: IRB Materials

Institutional Review Board (IRB)
The Office for Research Protections
205 The 330 Building
University Park, PA 16802 | 814-865-1775 | ORProtections@psu.edu

Submitted by: Thomas Corrigan
Date Submitted: February 20, 2011 02:38:39 PM
IRB#: 36193
PI: Thomas F. Corrigan

Study Title

1>Study Title  Manufacturing Sports Blogs: The Political Economy and Practice of Networked Sports Blogs
2>Type of eSubmission  New

Home Department for Study

3>Department where research is being conducted or if a student study, the department overseeing this research study.  Mass Communications

Review Level

4>What level of review do you expect this research to need? NOTE: The final determination of the review level will be determined by the IRB Administrative Office. Choose from one of the following:  Exemption

5>Exempt Review Categories:
Choose one or more of the following categories that apply to your research. You may choose more than one category but your research must meet one of the following categories to be considered for expedited review.
[X]  Category 2: Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observations of public behavior unless:
[X]  Category 4: Research involving the collection or study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens, if these sources are publicly available or if the information is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that participants cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the participants.

Basic Information: Association with Other Studies

6>Is this research study associated with other IRB-approved studies, e.g., this study is an extension study of an ongoing study or this study will use data or tissue from
another ongoing study?  No

7>Where will this research study take place? Choose all that apply.
   [X] University Park

8>Specify the building, and room at University Park where this research study will take place. If not yet known, indicate as such.  Face-to-face interviews will be conducted in a location convenient and comfortable for the interview participant. These locations are not yet determined since the interview participants have not been identified at this time. Phone interviews will occur in the primary investigator's office, James 206D. Collection of public data will occur in the primary investigator's office, James 206D.

9>Does this research study involve any of the following centers?
   [X] None of these centers are involved in this study

10>Describe the facilities available to conduct the research for the duration of the study.
   A majority of research will be conducted in Room 206D of the James Building—the office Thomas F. Corrigan, the study's principal investigator. Phone interviews conducted using Google Voice will occur in James 206D when convenient for the participant. The James Building is a University-owned building that is locked throughout the summer and requires a University-issued key for entry. The building is publicly accessible during the day and early evenings. University personnel lock the building in the evening, upon which entry to the James Building requires a University-issued key or an activated PSU ID that can be swiped for entry. The PI for this study, Thomas F. Corrigan, has a University-issued key for entry into the James Building. The office of the principal investigator is secure and private; it is located on the second floor of the James building. The floor has been designated for use by graduate students in Communication only. Room 206 itself is a small "wing" of the second floor of the James Building that is secured 24-hours a day, 7-days a week with a locked door that requires a private passcode for entry. This code is issued only to graduate students in Communication; the PI, Thomas F. Corrigan, has a copy of this passcode. Beyond this small office is a second office -- 206D -- which is the office of the study's principal investigator. Room D is separated from Room 206 by a second door that is also locked 24 hours a day/7 days a week and requires a University-issued key for entry. Room 206 D is the personal office of Thomas F. Corrigan, the study's PI. It is private and secure. There are bathrooms for both men and women on the second floor of the James Building, as well as a water fountain. Offices have air-conditioning and heat, which are regulated by the University. There is an emergency exit on this floor, as well. The office also has wireless internet; the password for this internet service is only available to graduate students in Communication and must be authorized by the College of Communication for use. James 206D also has a private telephone landline. The PI for this study, Thomas F. Corrigan, will occupy this office through the duration of the study.

11>Is this study being conducted as part of a class requirement? For additional information regarding the difference between a research study and a class requirement, see IRB Policy 1 – “Student Class Assignments/Projects” located at http://www.research.psu.edu/policies/research-protections/irb/irb-policy-1. No
Personnel
12>Personnel List

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PSU User ID</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Department Affiliation</th>
<th>Role in this study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>tfc115</td>
<td>Corrigan, Thomas F.</td>
<td>Mass Communications</td>
<td>Principal Investigator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mch208</td>
<td>Hardin, Marie</td>
<td>Journalism</td>
<td>Advisor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Role in this study**  Principal Investigator
- **First Name**  Thomas
- **Middle Name**  F.
- **Last Name**  Corrigan
- **Credentials**  PhD Candidate
- **PSU User ID**  tfc115
- **Email Address**  tfc115@psu.edu
- **PSU Employment Status**  Employed
  - [X]  Person should receive emails about this application
- **Mailing Address**  924 Walnut St. Apt. C
- **Address (Line 2)**
  - Mail Code
  - City
  - State
  - ZIP Code 16801
- **Phone Number**
- **Fax number**
- **Pager Number**
- **Alternate Telephone**
- **Department Affiliation**  Mass Communications
- **Identify the procedures/techniques this person will perform (i.e. recruit participants, consent participants, administer the study):**  Principal investigator - will recruit participants, obtain consent from participants, administer the study, collect data, analyze data and will be responsible for final write-up.
- **Describe the person’s level of experience in performing the procedures/techniques described above:**  The principal investigator has firsthand experience with human subjects research and ethics, and has been involved in several human subjects projects with Penn State faculty. Thomas has experience in qualitative research, including COMM511, ADTED 551, and several research projects with Penn State faculty.

- **Role in this study**  Advisor
- **First Name**  Marie
- **Middle Name**
- **Last Name**  Hardin
- **Credentials**  PhD
- **PSU User ID**  mch208
- **Email Address**  mch208@psu.edu
- **PSU Employment Status**  Employed
  - [ ]  Person should receive emails about this application
- **Mailing Address**  201 Carnegie Building
- **Address (Line 2)**
  - Mail Code
  - City
  - State
  - ZIP Code 16802
- **Phone Number**
- **Fax number**
- **Pager Number**
- **Alternate Telephone**
- **Department Affiliation**  Journalism
- **Identify the procedures/techniques this person will perform (i.e. recruit participants,
**consent participants, administer the study:** None. This person is the principle investigator’s research adviser and will read the final written results of the study. Marie Hardin may also read early drafts of the study, as well, but will not have any involvement with data collection, transcription, coding or analysis.

**Describe the person’s level of experience in performing the procedures/techniques described above:** Marie Hardin is an Associate Professor in the College of Communications and Associate Dean for Graduate Studies and Research. Dr. Hardin has served on a number of graduate student committees in the College of Communications using various forms of data collection, including qualitative methods.

### Funding Source

13>Is this research study funded? Funding could include the sponsor providing drugs or devices for the study.  No

**NOTE:** If the study is funded or funding is pending, submit a copy of the grant proposal or statement of work for review.

14>Does this research study involve prospectively providing treatment or therapy to participants?  No

### Conflict of Interest

15>Do any of the investigator(s), key personnel, and/or their spouses or dependent children have a financial or business interest(s) as defined by PSU Policy RA20, “Individual Conflict of Interest,” associated with this research?  NOTE: There is no de minimis in human participant research studies (i.e., all amount must be reported).  No

### Exemption Questions (Prescreening)

16>Does this research study involve prisoners?  No

17>Does this research study involve the use of deception?  No

18>Does this research study involve any FDA regulated drug, biologic or medical device?  No

19>Does this research study involve the use of protected health information covered under the Health Insurance Portability & Accountability Act (HIPAA)?  No

### Exemption Questions

20>Maximum number of participants/samples/records to be enrolled.  20

21>Age range – Check all that apply:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>18 – 25 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>26 – 40 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>41 – 65 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>65 + years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

22>Describe the steps that will be used to identify and/or contact prospective participants. If applicable, explain how you have access to lists or records of potential participants. Most SB Nation bloggers maintain a publicly accessible profile with their real name, a short biographical section, and an e-mail address at which they can be contacted (some, however, use pseudonyms, do not provide a biographical...
section, and/or do not provide a contact e-mail address). These public profiles can be accessed at the bottom of any of the SB Nation blogs. The PI will identify bloggers that (1) meet this study's inclusion criteria (discussed later) and (2) provide an e-mail address at which they can be contacted. The PI will then send an e-mail to the blogger that (1) briefly explains the study's research interests, (2) lays out what would be expected of them should he or she choose to participate, (3) requests a time and phone number at which the blogger could be contacted to set up a long interview, and (4) assures confidentiality throughout the process. The PI will also utilize the snowball sampling technique once an interview participant has been secured. At the conclusion of the long interviews the PI will ask the interview participant if he or she can recommend a fellow SB Nation blogger (that meets the inclusion criteria) whose input could inform the research interests for this study.

23> Choose the types of recruitment materials that will be used.
[X] Email [X] Other

24> Describe the other methods that will be used to recruit potential participants?
Snowball sampling method explained previously.

25> When and where will participants be approached to obtain informed consent/assent? If participants could be non-English speaking, explain how consent/assent will be obtained. If consent/assent will not be obtained, explain why consent/assent will not be obtained. Implied consent will be received from all participants. For face-to-face interviews, participants will be asked at the beginning of the interview--before any interview questions have been asked--to read the implied consent form. Interviews will not begin until the participant has done so. The participant will receive a copy of the implied consent form for his or her records. Most interviews will occur over the phone using Google Voice. The researcher will begin by reading the implied consent form (script) and asking the participant for verbal consent. The PI will also e-mail a copy of the implied consent form to the participant for his or her records. It is unlikely that there will be any language barriers or other special circumstances for this research in that almost all content on SB Nation blogs is in English, and it can be presumed that those creating such content will also speak English

26> Provide the background information and rationale for performing the study. Over the past decade the sports blog developed into a popular platform for the production, distribution, and consumption of sports news and opinion. Emerging research on sports blogging provides a descriptive look at who sports bloggers are, some of the values and beliefs they bring to their craft ("From outside the press box," 2009), and the response from sports journalists to the emerging new platform (Schultz & Sheffer, 2007, 2008a, 2008b). No research has looked at how sports blog content is produced and why it is produced the way it is. While the area is a still developing sphere for study, a broader look at studies of user-generated content demonstrates "a shocking dearth of ethnographic and field research" (cf. Lowrey & Latta, 2008; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009: 577). This proposal aims to address these 'how' and 'why' questions through original empirical and interpretive analyses of 'blogwork' at a popular sports blog network—SB Nation. Empirically, this research aims to develop accounts of bloggers' work routines or "standard operating procedures" for producing content. Drawing on
the media sociology literature, this research approaches these work routines as "the crucial factor" determining the construction of news (Fishman, 1980: 14). An interpretive component aims to develop accounts of bloggers' understandings of their practice, including "both typical motives and intentions as well as conceptions of conditions" (Comstock, 1982: 380-381). In other words, this research aims to develop a picture of sports blogging at SB Nation from the sports blogger's perspective. Adopting a realist and critical approach, though, this research does not rest on these empirical and interpretive components (Mosco, 1996: 2-9); instead, the researcher seeks to historicize blogwork and to understand how the options available to SB Nation and its bloggers are "limited and constrained"—structurally—by political and economic processes (Murdock, 1982: 124). The expectation is that emergent contradictions between blogwork routines, bloggers' understandings of operations at SB Nation, and the historically specific pressures and limitations shaping this practice, should produce a complex understanding of how sports blog content is produced and why it is produced the way it is.

27> Summarize the study's key objectives, aims or goals. This study aims to produce a complex understanding of how sports blog content is produced and why it is produced the way it is. To address this general aim, three specific areas of interest are explored: (1) What "blogwork" routines do SB Nation bloggers use to create content? (2) How do bloggers understand their practice (both in terms of their own blogging and broader operations at SB Nation)? (3) How have political and economic processes—particularly processes of audience and labor commodification—shaped SB Nation and the practices of SB Nation bloggers?

28> Describe the major inclusion and exclusion criteria. Inclusion: The criteria for inclusion are (1) SB Nation bloggers that (2) post on a daily basis to a SB Nation blog and (3) are identified on that blog as a "manager," "editor," "contributor," "writer" (or are designated another title specific to that blog). Interviewees must be 18 years of age. No interview participant will be excluded based on race, ethnicity, sex, gender, sexual orientation, religion, class, creed or any other determinant. Exclusion: Participants who do not meet the criteria for inclusion will be excluded. Specifically, bloggers who do not post on a daily basis to a SB Nation blog or are not identified by that blog as having a titled editorial role in the construction of the blog will not be included as possible participants.

29> Summarize the study’s procedures by providing a step-by-step process of what participants will be asked to do. A large component of this study—the structural analysis—draws on existing public data, including (for example) trade press coverage and content on the webpages for SB Nation and its affiliate blogs. The two components of the research that involve human subjects participants include (1) a long interview with each participant and (2) a week of roughly 15 minute daily telephone interviews with each participant. The first component is geared toward developing accounts of how bloggers understand their practice (both in terms of their own blogging and broader operations at SB Nation). The second is geared toward developing accounts of the “blogwork” routines SB Nation bloggers use to create content. After a participant has been identified as meeting the inclusion criteria, he or she will be contacted via e-mail using the recruitment e-mail (previously described). A long interview will be arranged with those that respond to the recruitment e-mail and demonstrate interest in
participating. If a participant is within driving distance of the researcher, the researcher will request a time and place for a face-to-face long interview. If the participant is not within driving distance, the researcher will request a time at which the participant can be contacted for a long interview using Google Voice. Face-to-face long interviews will begin with the participant reading the implied consent form and verbally responding to it. Long interviews in which the participant is contacted using Google Voice will begin with the researcher reading the implied consent form to the participant and asking for a verbal response. Long interviews (both face-to-face and those using Google Voice) will be recorded using the researcher's MacBook computer and Audacity podcasting software, as explained to the participant in the implied consent form. After the participant has verbally indicated consent, the researcher will begin the long interview with a short demographics section, followed by the interview questions (see long interview schedule). At the end of the long interview, the researcher will ask for a date and time at which the participant can be contacted via Google Voice to begin the week of daily telephone interviews. Having set up a date and time at which the participant can be contacted via Google Voice to begin the week of daily telephone interviews, the researcher will then contact the participant at that date and time. The researcher will ask whether the participant has any questions or concerns about the process up to that point or going forward, and the researcher will respond to any such questions or concerns. The researcher will then ask the daily telephone interview questions (see daily telephone interview schedule). At the end of the daily telephone interview (and each daily telephone interview after that), the researcher will ask for a date and time at which the participant can be contacted for the next daily telephone interview. The researcher recognizes that this daily telephone interview process may not work well with some participants' daily schedules, so flexibility in the scheduling process will be accounted for. To facilitate discussion during the daily telephone interviews, the principal investigator will collect participants' blog entries on the days that the daily telephone interviews are scheduled. The principal investigator may also collect other blog entries by the participant that are relevant to the study; such collection will occur on an ad hoc basis. Any such collection of blog entries will occur by accessing the blog's public archives. Collected blog entries will be saved on the principal investigator's personal computer in password protected files.

30> Indicate the type(s) of compensation that will be offered. Choose all that apply.
[X] Compensation will NOT be offered

31> Will any type of recordings (audio, video or digital) or photographs be made during this study? Yes

32> What type of recordings will be made (including digital)? Choose all that apply.
[X] Audio

33> Where the recordings/photographs will be stored? Audio recordings will be stored as MP3s in a password protected file on the PI's MacBook. They will also be backed up on an thumb drive immediately after recording. The thumb drive will be used only for the purposes of this study. The external hard drive will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in James, 206 D--the principal investigator's office.

34> Who will have access to the recordings/photographs? Only Thomas F. Corrigan--the PI.
35> How will the recordings be transcribed, coded and by whom? Each interviews’ MP3 file will be labeled by the number in which the interview is conducted. A separate coding sheet will be kept on a password-protected file on the PI’s personal MacBook. The coding sheet will identify participants and their pseudonyms to be used in the written results. The recordings will be transcribed and coded by the PI.

36> Will the recordings/photographs be destroyed? Yes

37> How and when will the recordings/photographs be destroyed? The recordings will be destroyed three years after the close of the study by deleting the MP3 files and disposing of the thumb drive.

38> Will any data collection for this study be conducted on the Internet or via email (e.g., on-line surveys, blogs or chat room observations, on-line interviews, email surveys)? Yes

39> Does this study involve any foreseeable risks and/or discomforts to participants – physical, psychological, social, legal or other? No

40> Will data be stored securely and accessible only to the research personnel listed on this application? Yes

41> Describe how data confidentiality will be maintained. Caution will be taken in the written results to ensure that interview statements cannot be linked to public content produced online by the interviewee (and vice versa). Where something discussed in an interview pertains to the participant’s online activity, measures will be taken to ensure the interview statements cannot be linked to the online content. One such measure will include the use of pseudonyms for all individuals, specific blog names, and sports organizations discussed in interviews that could indicate the identity of the participant. Direct quotes from online content will not be used in conjunction with discussion of specific interviews, thus preventing an online search of the direct quote from revealing the interview participant. Paraphrasing will supplement direct quotes and will be structured in a way to maximize the participant’s privacy.

Document Upload

CONSENT FORMS
Document 1001 Received 01/27/2011 18:41:32 - Adult Form Implied Consent Form (phone interview script)
Document 1002 Received 01/27/2011 18:42:24 - Adult Form Implied Consent Form (sent to phone interview)
Document 1003 Received 01/27/2011 18:43:14 - Adult Form Informed Consent Form (face-to-face interview)
Document 1004 Received 02/20/2011 14:21:24 - Adult Form Implied Consent Script (Amended)
Document 1005 Received 02/20/2011 14:22:14 - Adult Form Implied Consent (Amended)

CORRESPONDENCE
Document 1001 Received 02/20/2011 14:18:13 - Correspondence E-mail Recruitment
Correspondence (Amend

DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS
  Document 1001 Received 01/28/2011 17:35:37 - Long Interview Schedule
  Document 1002 Received 01/28/2011 17:36:15 - Daily Telephone Interview Schedule

REVIEW - REQUEST INFO
  Document 1001 Received 02/09/2011 05:34:01 PM - Returned for Additional Information

SUBMISSION FORMS
  Document 1001 Received 01/31/2011 04:29:01 PM - Application Auto-generated by eSubmission Approval
Implied Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research
The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: Manufacturing Sports Blogs: The Political Economy and Practice of Networked Sports Blogs

Principal Investigator: Thomas F. Corrigan
115 Carnegie Bldg.
State College, PA 16802
tfc115@psu.edu; 850-345-7864

Advisor: Dr. Marie Hardin
201 Carnegie Bldg
University Park, PA 16802
mch208@psu.edu; 814-863-5678

1. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research is to gain a clearer understanding of how networked sports bloggers create content and why content is created in the way that it is.

2. Procedures to be followed: You will be asked to participate in a set of interviews with the study’s principal investigator, Thomas F. Corrigan. This first interview is geared toward developing an account, from your perspective, of both your blogging practices and the broader operations of your blog network; however, you’ll also be asked to participate in a subsequent week of daily telephone interviews in which we’ll discuss your specific blogging practices for that day. These daily telephone interviews may or may not fall on consecutive days based on your availability. To facilitate discussion during these daily telephone interviews, the principal investigator will collect and refer to some of your blog entries during the interviews. Our discussion will be audio-recorded in all interviews, and the principal investigator will be contacted you using the principal investigator’s Google Voice account so that he can more easily speak to the computer, record, and take notes.

3. Duration: This first interview should take about 1 hour to complete. The subsequent daily telephone interviews should take about 15 minutes each to complete. In all, the total time commitment for this research is less than three hours.

4. Statement of Confidentiality: Your participation in this research is confidential. The data will be stored and secured in password protected files on the principal investigator’s personal computer. Back-ups of these files will be stored in the principal investigator’s office, James Building 206D, in a locked filing cabinet. Only the principal investigator will have access to the audio recordings of interviews. The data will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study. In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared. Pseudonyms will be used in the final write-up and in all presentations of this research. In instances where direct quotations are used from a specific blog entry, the principal investigator will take care not to connect such quotations to the contributions of any specific interviewee. Your confidentiality will be kept to the degree permitted by the technology used. No guarantees can be made regarding the interception of data sent via the Internet by any third parties.
5. **Right to Ask Questions:** Please contact Thomas F. Corrigan at (850) 345-7864 or tfc115@psu.edu with questions, complaints or concerns about this research.

6. **Voluntary Participation:** Your decision to be in this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

You must be 18 years of age or older to take part in this research study.

Completion of the interview implies your consent to participate in this research. Please print and keep this form for your records.
Appendix B: Recruitment E-mail

Subject: Request for participation in sports blogging research

Hi. My name is Thomas F. Corrigan (or T.C.). I am a PhD Candidate at Penn State University. I’m currently conducting interviews with sports bloggers from your blog network as part of my dissertation research. My study is aimed at understanding how networked sports bloggers put together content on a routine basis and why they put together content in the way that they do. My hope is that this study will inform our understanding of content creation in the new media environment.

Should you choose to participate--and I would greatly appreciate it if you did--you would be asked to take part in a series of interviews. The first interview is geared toward getting your perspective on the processes for creating content for your blog, as well as within your blog network more generally. This first interview would take roughly one hour, and it would be conducted either face-to-face (if you’re within driving distance) or over the phone (if you’re not within driving distance). Subsequent daily interviews would occur over the course of a week, in which you and I would have a roughly 15-minute discussion about your blogging practices for that specific day. To facilitate discussion during these daily telephone interviews, I will collect and refer to some of your blog entries during the interviews.

In all, the total time commitment for this research is less than three hours. I recognize that this may be a substantial time commitment, but I’m willing to work around your schedule as much as possible. I would be happy to build some flexibility into the process if a full week of interviews would be impossible.

Participation in this study is confidential.

If you could contact me when you have an opportunity (850-345-7864 or tfc115@psu.edu) to let me know whether you would be interested in participating of not, it would be greatly appreciated. If you are interested in participating we can set up a time for the initial interview.

Thanks for your time,

Thomas F. Corrigan (T.C.)
PhD Candidate
College of Communications
Pennsylvania State University
115 Carnegie Building
University Park, PA
850-345-7864
tfc115@psu.edu
Appendix C: Long Interview Schedule

Thank you for your participation.

As just noted, this first interview is primarily concerned with how you—as a sports blogger—understand your own blogging and sports blog production at SBNation more generally. We're going to start off with a short set of demographics questions before discussing a range of interests I have in your blogging, including how content production is organized within your blog, your relationship with the SB Nation network of blogs, how sources, resources and technology play into posting, how you understand your relationship with your audience, and how you see sports blogging fitting into the broader sports media landscape.

While I do have a loose guide of questions, I want this to be a rather free flowing discussion that allows for you to provide your perspectives, me to understand your take on things, and both of us to hit on topics that emerge in discussion and seem pertinent to my research.

At the end of this interview can discuss and try to nail down some times for the shorter, roughly 15-minute interviews over the course of a week that I hope we can follow this interview up with.

Do you have any questions at this point before we move forward?

DEMOGRAPHICS

I'm going to start with a short demographics and personal background section:

Your gender:
___ Male
___ Female

Your age: _____

Your ethnicity:
___ Caucasian/White
___ African-American/Black
___ American Indian/Eskimo
___ Asian/Pacific Islander
___ Hispanic
___ Other

Your education level:
___ High School
___ Some undergraduate
___ College degree
___ Some graduate work
___ Master's Degree
___ Law Degree
___ Ph.D.

Your primary occupation:
Your personal yearly income:
___ Less than $10,000
___ $10,000 - $19,999
___ $20,000 - $29,999
___ $30,000 - $39,999
___ $40,000 - $49,999
___ $50,000 - $59,999
___ $60,000 - $69,999
___ $70,000 - $79,999
___ $80,000 - $89,999
___ $90,000 - $99,999
___ $100,000 - $149,999
More than $150,000 ______________________

Marital Status:
___ Single
___ Engaged
___ Married
___ Divorced
___ Widowed

WORK HISTORY:

• Okay, moving into the meat of the interview, tell me about how your background as a sports blogger. How did you get involved with blogging, and how did you become an SB Nation blogger?
  o How long?

• Were you involved with your blog’s affiliation process with SB Nation? How did that work?
  o Why do you think SB Nation was interested in your blog?
  o What are the terms of your affiliation?
  o What do they get from the arrangement and what do you get out of it?

• Did you have a background in writing, reporting, or editing before you got involved in sports blogging?
  o Any formal training as a journalist?
  o How does that experience inform your blogging?
  o Similarities/differences with sports blogging?

BLOG ORGANIZATION

• Describe your position at your blog. What roles or responsibilities does it entail?
  o Have you occupied other positions at your blog? Why the change?

• What other positions are involved in your blog’s operations and what do those people do?
• How does your work relate to their work?
  o Is there a hierarchy of positions for your blog? What is it?

• How are decisions at your blog made about what to cover and how to cover it? What individuals or groups have power in these processes?
  o Do you have editorial “meetings”?
  o Can you tell me about any specific disagreements among your blog’s personnel over roles, responsibilities, or content? How were these resolved?

• Is there any sort of story quota or deadlines?
  o Are these from SBNation or were they developed by your blog?

• Are you aware of any formal or informal editorial policies or guidelines?
  o Are these from SBNation or were they developed by your blog?

• How about SBNation management? Do you have interactions with them? What are their expectations for affiliate blogs?
  o Have management or top editors ever provided any suggestions, complements, etc.?

• How do you monitor the sports world?
  o Watch/attend games?
  o RSS feeds?

• Do you have human sources from the sports world, and if so, what does your interaction with them look like?

• What kind of access do you have to the teams you cover?
  o Credentials? Interviews?
  o Have you had any issues with access?

• What technologies do you use to produce your blog posts in terms of hardware and software? I’m particularly interested in the platform used by SBNation bloggers—its strengths and limitations.

• I’m going to list a couple of common influences on media work, and I’d like you to talk about the pressures and constraints (either positive or negative) that these factors might present for your blogging:
  o Time?
  o Financial?
  o Technology?
  o Management?
  o Sources?
  o Personal?
  o Audience?

DEVELOPMENTS AT SBNATION
I’m going to ask you about a few recent developments at SB Nation and I want you to tell me your perspective on them and if they’ve had any impact on your blogging.

• First, tell me about the “StoryStream” application? Why was it introduced? And how do you use it, as a blogger?
  o Does it play a big role in your blogging?
  o Are there certain types of posts that work better for the story stream than others?
  o Do you ever produce content that you know will work great with it? Or shy away from posts that won’t?

• Tell me about the central landing page that SB Nation introduced in 2009. Did this present any changes for affiliate blogs? What kind of content are SB Nation editors looking for?
  o Does your audience access your content differently?
  o Do you try to get posts placed on the new landing page? How?

• SB Nation has developed content sharing arrangements with several major sports media outlets over the past few years. Have you had any of your content picked up by these outlets?
  o Has this shaped the direction of your blog or SB Nation more broadly?
  o Is there a push at SB Nation to try to be visible in the wider media landscape?
  o What kinds of content are these outlets looking for?

• SB Nation also introduced its 20 local sites last year. Give me your impression of these sites.
  o Has the introduction of these sites been important for your blog?
  o What do the 20 local sites offer that a team-specific structure doesn’t?
  o I’ve seen that each of the local pages has an editorial team. What does the editorial process for these local sites look like?

• SB Nation has also secured investment from private equity firms and venture capital investors. Has there been any change in direction at SB Nation with this investment?

• Have there been other noteworthy changes you’ve seen in your time at SB Nation that I should know about?

MANAGEMENT

• I recognize that this can be a personal question, but can you tell me if you make money from your sports blogging, and if so, how much you make.
  o Where does this revenue come from?

• Do you see other benefits from your sports blogging or your relationship with SB Nation that may not be directly financial?
  o Branding? Exposure?
  o Are there benefits that you envision accruing from your sports blogging down the road?
• One way that SB Nation differs from some of the other blog networks is the team exclusivity each blog has within the network. Why does SBNation only have one blog for each team?
  o Does exclusivity provide your blog any benefits that you might not see otherwise?
  o Do you have any concerns that your blog could be replaced with another exclusive blog? Would that ever happen?

AUDIENCE

• Tell me about your audience or readership. How big is your audience and what do you know about them?
  o Where do you get information about them?

• How much interaction do you have with your audience?
  o Do you interact with them online?
  o Any other contexts?

• What type of content does your audience want to read about?
  o Do you feel pressures from the audience to provide a certain type, amount, or regularity of content?
  o How does your audience let you know what they want to read about?

BLOGGERS/JOURNALISTS

• SBNation is often described as being “fan-centric” or reflecting “fan-perspective.” What do these terms mean to you? Do you think these terms accurately reflect your blogging?

• I read an article on SBNation that was debating what SBNation bloggers would like to be called. There were suggestions sports journalist, sports blogger, and fan advocate. How do you describe your work and why?

• What is your take on the state of traditional sports journalism today?
  o How does your work fit into or distinguish itself from traditional sports journalism?
  o Do you have any aspirations to get into the traditional or mainstream sports media industry?

• Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you think I should know about blog production at SBNation?

CLOSING:

Those are all my questions. I'd like to thank you for your time today. Before I go though, I'd also like to schedule a time for our first of the daily telephone interviews that I'd like to conduct over the course of a week—if your schedule permits it. Is there a time tomorrow, preferably after you've posted for the day, that I could give you a call?

Well, again, thanks for your time and I'll be in touch tomorrow.
Appendix D: Daily Telephone Interview Schedule

To reiterate what we talked about yesterday, for these shorter interviews I’m specifically interested in how blogging fits into your daily life and the routines you may use to select topics, gather information, and produce content.

DAILY ROUTINE:

I’m going to ask you, first, to take me through your day, noting, specifically those points at which you worked on research or content production for today’s blog posts.

QUESTIONS FOR EACH BLOG POST:

Okay, now I’m going to ask you some questions specifically concerned with each of your blog posts for today. Tell me first about the post titled . . .

ENTRY TITLE: ____________________________________________________________

ENTRY TIME: ____________________________________________________________

How did you become aware of this topic and why did you decide to post about it?

Were others from SB Nation consulted in the conceptualization or production of the post?

Were there any other topics that you were considering writing about for today but didn’t end up doing so? Why?

What resources did you consult in researching this topic and preparing the post?

Who is the desired audience for the post? How does this content suit their wants or needs?

Were any changes were made to the post prior to or after publication?
Vita: Thomas F. Corrigan

Education
Ph.D., Mass Communications, Pennsylvania State University
M.S., Communication, Florida State University
B.A., Communication, Florida State University

Selected Publications


Book Reviews


Employment
2012 Assistant Professor, Temple University
2009-2011 Instructor, Pennsylvania State University
2007-2008 Research Assistant & Teaching Assistant, Pennsylvania State University
2005-2007 Lab Instructor & Teaching Assistant, Florida State University