

## **The Business of Sports and Reporting: How Twitter and The 24/7 News Cycle Have Changed The Way We Cover Sports.**

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Is it being first or being right? “No one remembers who was first...I’d rather be right,” said Chris Clark, Online Sports Editor of Comcast Sports Net Chicago. Well, no one remembers who was first unless they got it wrong!

This is the battle being waged in the newsroom and in cyberspace today. As print begins to fade, and online reporting continues to develop and grow, this issue is at the center of the debate on where journalism is going from here.

Is journalism a dying profession? What can we do to make sure that journalism and the desire to seek information and report it continues successfully into the future?

Because of the increasing level of competition and the number of places to get news today, journalists are faced with an important choice.

Is it more important to report all the facts despite the consequences for the athlete, team, paper, or reporter? Or, is the focus on being first, selling papers and increasing page views with entertaining or salacious stories?

Every journalist must “feed the monster,” said Dale Hansen, Sports Director and Newscasters for Dallas, Texas’s ABC Affiliate, WFAA-TV.

“We need to have people quoting us or referencing us...but we are in the business of bringing the news to the public, and upholding journalistic standards,” said Hansen.

However, we will “always be a business.”

In the world of sports journalism, it is important to understand the challenges and benefits of working in a 24-hour news cycle and the ways that reporters work to balance the business with the mission to give people the news they want to know.

The word journalist itself is in such a state of flux, that it is hard to identify what we mean by this word. Is it a person employed by a news organization who is paid to write or can “a kid sitting in his bedroom eating Cheetos writing a blog,” said Hansen, who is the first to report on something, be considered a journalist?

Are these two people any more or less qualified as journalists? What makes one more credible? With the blogosphere anyone can become a journalist and report. And even further, that same person sitting at home blogging might be an accredited, degree holding ‘Journalist’ working for a major sports network.

Is it the company logo that gives them credibility? Is it the degree? Or is it neither and nothing separates these individuals except our preference (and possibly our generation).

Twitter, for example, is the new ground zero of sports coverage and is shaping the business of how we report on athletes and their respective teams. Not only for citizen reporters but also for established newsrooms.

Whether you are watching the game from home, attending it live, or recording it for later, twitter is the first place where happenings of the game will be reported.

Sports journalists and news reporters in today's atmosphere are faced with a very different world than they were 10 or 20 years ago. While in years past a sports reporter could go to a night game then write their story that night and it not appear till the next day, today that just isn't so.

Today, your deadline is now! Sports reporters, especially, are expected to be using social media and blogs during the game and reporting what they see as it happens. The story they will run the following day or later that night will be a much more detailed piece however whatever was in that original tweet will be the sound that broke the news.

“We try to do 15 blog posts a day for each team,” said Clark. As one of his online reporters, you are constantly blogging and updating the information before, during and after games.

Twitter has become essential, not only for reporting but for networking, building an audience and keeping in contact with other reporters.

“I have found twitter vital to bringing people to my work,” said Richard Justice, columnist for MLB.com.

Unfortunately, there are many reporters hesitant to grasp on to this changing tide of technology and reporting tools that are taking hold and changing the business in radical ways.

“People are still hesitant to come over the online side,” said Clark.

“It depends on their grasp or fear of the internet. Some people are more apt to try things,” he said.

The role of the reporter has drastically changed to include not one medium, but to be able to do work from multiple platforms and report, edit, and produce stories completely on your own in the field.

Many of the older generation of reporters fear that the age of the citizen journalist has perverted the profession and demolished the integrity of what we call news. This generation blames the blogging sites and continues to profess that this is a dying profession.

It is of the utmost importance that we prove otherwise. This profession is not dying but is in fact maturing and finding new paths to forge in the name of news and development.

Today's sports journalist can attend a game, take pictures, shoot video, following and contribute to the social media coverage of the game during which, then blog about the game for a piece to be uploaded an hour after the game.

Although this sounds like a limiting skill, it isn't. It simply opens up the possibility for journalists to be creative in the storytelling. To return to the days of giving people news they need to know but now it can be accessed from multiple places at one.

They may then in fact help in putting together a TV broadcast package of the game, provide commentary or write a story for the next day's paper. The sports journalist is responsible for so much more than who won and some statistics to include with the box score.

The tools that are made available to journalists are ever growing, from twitter and storify to high definition cameras and tablets with video editing capabilities. The gap between the speeds at which reporters can report a story are closing faster and faster making it all the more important

that journalists be quick, and be accurate. The competition to be first and be right has only intensified.

However, as the technology continues to grow and develop what's necessary for reporters to remain competitive is becoming more and more impossible to deny.

"Stories that wouldn't have aired years ago, get run now," said Hansen.

"We are sharing information much more so now."

These new relationships that are being cultivated and new ways to report have opened up the field in so many ways but it's important that reporters remain cautious of the news they put out there.

With twitter and its immediacy, it is all the more important that reporters carefully check and read their tweets. The benefit of a tweet is it is short and to the point, but if you report something to quickly without verification or links to your sources you risk causing more damage than had you waited.

For example, the Joe Paterno death announcement incident is a prime example of this problem. In an effort to be first, or at least one of the first with the news, a reporter ran with a premature report from a student organization that the infamous coach had passed away, when in fact he would not pass till several hours later. This false report would result in the loss of his job, and continue to warn reporters of the pitfalls inherent with an instant messaging system such as Twitter.

No matter what corrections you make and retractions, someone already saw it and possibly resent that out to multiple people.

"We all make mistakes, but because of urgency we don't have a filter anymore," said Hansen.

"Twitter reports it and the mainstream eventually picks it up," said Hansen.

One way to address this issue is to be the one posting to twitter. When the reporter is the one who sees something, they can tweet about it, and tell their editors to put it up on the web. That way, no longer is it an issue of Twitter being first but it's the station, newspaper, or reporter affiliated with that paper.

Editors can also work to verify what you may not have time to check, allowing for a safety net in tweeting breaking news.

This same method is being used by sports teams to control the message the media has.

"The media allows them to put their point of view and perception out there" by giving them the platform said Hansen.

Sports teams have also developed websites where their won PR team has crafted the story and made it the only place to get that exclusive. This not only enables them to control the story, but also drives traffic to their site and promotes their team and players.

"There is definitely more distance between athletes and the media than in previous years," said Justice.

"It's much tougher in the NFL because there is less access and PR people monitor interviews and cut them off quickly."

“I’ve often said that every politician, athlete, and executive could study PR from Magic Johnson, Michael Jordan, and Larry Bird. They were absolutely brilliant in making themselves available, getting the point across and pretty much dictating how they’d be covered,” said Justice.

When it comes to reporting fair and unbiased news, reporters are now navigating much more murky waters.

“Typical is atypical,” said Clark.

The news that sports writers are going to cover and how they will cover it are not predictable. Every story can be presented in a myriad of different ways and through many different mediums. In addition to many formats for the story, the story can be less news you need to know and more gossip type opinion.

“Gossip was all in one section, but now its everywhere,” said Clark.

“We’ve got a lot of speculation, innuendo, and gossip passing itself off as news,” said Hansen.

“We send the message that we are here to entertain...but the viewer is done a disservice reading clearly slanted stories.”

News is heavily influenced by what the public finds appealing. Its no longer what the public *needs* to know but what they *want* to know. In a society where reality TV and people putting their personal lives out on display monopolize our entertainment, it’s not a surprise that audiences crave the salacious and personal details of the lives of players from their favorite teams.

And because teams know this, they use their players to build images of bad boys that will attract more fans, for example, Terrell Owens or Alex Rodriguez.

Most notably of late is MLB All Star outfielder for the Texas Rangers, Joshua Hamilton. Hamilton’s history with addiction his well publicized and his story of recovery is not only an asset for himself but his team has capitalized on this framework.

Hamilton was a 1<sup>st</sup> overall pick in 1999 at 18 for the MLB draft and he played with some success until 2001. In 2001 he began to suffer physical injuries and succumb to alcohol and drug addiction. Hamilton suffered from addiction and was in an out of rehab until 2005, when a baseball insider helped to put him back on his path.

Hamilton credits his family and his faith as a Christian for saving his life and getting him back to baseball. He described his recovery as a “God thing” in an interview with ESPN magazine in 2007. He also uses his story to help mentor his teammates and speak publicly to his community.

Hamilton’s story of recovery is one of inspiration and triumph, and the world of sports feeds off of those stories. They fuel the fan base and the tradition and culture of teams gaining them support and giving them strength and unity as a team.

So what happens when that image begins to change or is at risk of being tarnished. Hamilton is not just a member of the team but a symbol to his fans.

In 2009 and again in February of 2012 Hamilton admitted openly to have slipped from his path of sobriety. In 2009, the sports blogging site, Deadspin.com ran a story featuring photos of Hamilton, shirtless in a bar with several women. It also reported that witnesses alleged he had been drinking and inquiring about getting drugs.

In February, Hamilton was reported to have been drinking at a Pub in Dallas and was driven home by a teammate. Hamilton and the Texas Rangers immediately addressed both instances with the press and no punishment was issued. Hamilton has been required to take several weekly drug tests for several years now, all of which he has passed.

However, it is not known whether he will continue with the Rangers following spring training.

“Hamilton handled it better than most,” said Hansen.

He spoke with press immediately following the news breaking of the incidents and spoke honestly about slipping.

“He ad libbed it all and spoke from the heart,” said Hansen.

The media coverage of the Hamilton case has been a back and forth ride. How Hamilton, the team and the media addressed the situation that has been an interesting specimen of sports journalism in action in this 21<sup>st</sup> century world.

Hamilton openly discussed and publicized his addiction and recover in speeches, magazines, interviews and books. However, when the media discussed it in relation to his documented slips in sobriety, many fans cried out for the media to leave him alone.

“Hamilton might have gotten away with the first time if not for cell phone cameras and web sites posting,” about his night out said Justice, however “it’s a different era.”

“You say to the media ‘leave him alone’. But then when he wanted to use the media or the media provided the vehicle for his message, then it was ok,” said Hansen.

“Hamilton went on with Glenn Beck to talk about the incident and it was ok,” said Hansen but when the regular news media covers it and asks question, then it’s a problem with media sensationalism and invasion.

Tim Tebow on the other hand, is another player whose “good Christian boy” image is highly publicized, yet in his case mocked and criticized. One significant difference is the way the Hamilton is portrayed as the flawed underdog excelled in the face of adversity.

Tebow has tried, or the public have tried, to insert him into this framework, however many critics and fans do not agree. He is consistently ridiculed and but the media and fans for his praying on the field, dubbed Tebowing.

Deadspin.com even printed a story by Drew Magary in December 2011 entitled, “Why People Who Hate Tim Tebow Hate Tim Tebow.” Magary claims that the reason for the dislike of Tebow stems from the notion that he is an underdog, when many view him to be anything but.

Additionally, many show scorn for his openly displayed faith, Magary going so far as to state that he only plays well based on his ability, not because “Invisible Jesus is standing behind him at all times.”

This religious rhetoric seems to hurt his image, unlike with Hamilton, who only benefited from it.

The essential element here seems to be the application of the image. For Tebow, the image and religious framework is frequently applied to his playing ability, insinuating that he is something special from the other gifted players in the NFL.

However, with Hamilton this framework is merely a backdrop to his career, not a part of it. The way that the media and athletes cultivate images are essential to how they are viewed and the messages they send. Without the media relationship, athletes would have far less fan loyalty, and marketability; however, the sports arena might be more focused on the player's abilities on the field rather than off.

It's important for athletes and reporters to remember that they are linked in a necessary symbiotic relationship and they both use that relationship to cultivate their careers.

"They don't need us as much as they used to, but they still need us, and we need them," said Hansen.

"It's part of the culture," said Clark.

"Babe Ruth and Mickey Mantle would have never been the American Idols that they are if TMZ and Twitter had been around," said Hansen.

Players in those days were extremely brazen and brash, however their legend is for the skills as athletes. Although it almost certain that the public knew of their personal exploits by rumor, that behavior was not guaranteed to be plastered in front of the world forever, never to be forgotten.

Today athletes must be aware of the ever-present nature of not just the mainstream press but also the citizen press.

"Players are always on the record, either in terms of microphones or cameras," said Justice.

In those days, teams still used the images of their players to their advantage but every little detail of the lives of these athletes were not available to at your finger tips as they are today.

Reporters were expected to talk about their grandiose images and their legendary abilities but not about the scoundrels they were behind the scenes.

The personal issues were not as relevant to the story either.

"I don't draw parallel lines" between their personal behavior and "work ethic and pitching," said Justice.

"I'll write about his struggles if he's willing to talk," said Justice when asked whether the personal struggles or problems of athletes are relevant news stories.

"I couldn't just out the guy," said Justice, stating that instead he would inform coaches and teammates to get the player the help they needed as long as "he did his job well."

Even today this becomes an issue when reporters have to decide what stories they will run. This issue is fundamental to the definition of what it means to be a journalist today.

Journalists still hold to their ethical standards however, the lines between the relationship of teams, athletes and the reporters who cover them can get blurred and it can become hard to remain objective.

"I don't hang out with athletes and I don't go where they go," said Justice.

With the increasing number of websites that give praise and positive stories for teams, reporters can struggle to find that balance between what is the truth and what is not a lie.

"There's no question that stories are done and not done based on the relationship with the teams," said Hansen.

“It’s done on a regular basis and it’s a slippery slope that we are going down-hill a lot faster on.”

Reporters and news organizations are faced with having to decide how and on what stories to report on in fear or in favor of what the teams might think about the story. Decisions are made with consideration towards how it may affect the team. In the early days, if a team didn’t like the coverage they got, there was little they could do about it.

“But today, they don’t like certain coverage, they go to another station.”

Or better yet, they create their own station or website.

This is especially pertinent for those stations or papers that are owned by the sports club. This becomes an even bigger issue when a major news event or scandal presents itself and stations have to determine how to handle it.

“It bothers me more if the decision is made to not cover the story because of a partnership,” said Hansen.

In 2008 Quarter Back for the Stealers, Ben Roethlisberger was being accused of rape for a second time, and ESPN had decided they were not going to mention it, according to Hansen.

“This was Unconscionable. Dealing with a lawsuit of rape allegation, by any standard is a news story,” said Hansen.

“But ESPN wouldn’t let me talk about it because they had a TV deal with the team so I quit,” said Hansen.

This is not to say that teams consistently harass or intimidate stations into biasing their stories.

“Baseball beat writers seem to have very good access and the chance to build trust and relationships,” said Justice.

“It’s very relaxed and the reporters who cover the team the entire year do build relationships” with the players.

However, this is clearly an issue that news organizations must face and deal with, especially in this economic climate.

Reporting the news is a business and the bottom line is important to maintaining that business. The news requires funding and readership and some reporters have shown that their organizations handle these issues in respectable ways.

“I work for MLB.com which is owned by major league baseball and I write what I want to write,” said Justice.

“Even if I take a cheap shot, I try to make myself available in case someone has something to say.”

Sports reporters have always had strong relationships with the clubs they report on and this doesn’t look likely to change. The way that the relationship between reporters and athletes is cultivated is definitely in a transitional period, where both sides are learning to navigate these new technological waters. However, it is clear that both are in need of each other.

Athletes need the media to be the vehicle for the message and their image like journalists need the athletes to speak with them and provide access to what goes on behind the game everyone watched.

“I hate that what I think used to be a noble profession is now thrown in with used car salesman and lawyers,” said Hansen.

“The general public looks at us as looking to make a buck.”

Although this image of reporters as ‘muckrakers’ digging up dirt for rating and readership, there is evidence that many, if not most, “are ethical and just try to get the story right,” said Justice.

So what does this mean? Social media, the blogosphere and the 24-hour news cycle have changed the way we report and what we decide is news.

Athletes and teams rely on twitter, and official team websites to help control the story they send out to the public. These types of mediums allow the players and staffed reporters and PR directors to dictate the slant of a story, how soon it gets out and who hears it first.

Reporters are also relying more on these forms of reporting so to better reach their audience, engage their readers in discussion, and remain in front of the breaking news cycle.

Reporters efforts to maintain integrity and competitiveness in their coverage of sports rely on the their ability to remain unbiased, build relationships with athletes so they know your motives and cultivate relationships with your readers.

As a reporter, its important to remain distanced from the audience to some degree to maintain objectivity, but its also important to interact with them, discern what interests them and what issues they are questioning.

This enables the reporter to better cover stories the reader wants to know. Twitter and other social media sites are pivotal in this effort. Does the public care to know who an athlete is dating, or is their injury status or performance ability of more value?

Are these related topics? Possibly, however the key element is being able to discern what is news now and what is valuable to your audience.

Online reporting proficiency and the cultivation of professional relationships with the teams we cover are the two elements that will enable journalists to succeed in this changing society.



