

New ball game: covering sports, with teams as competitors

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In the spring of 2014, as the Baltimore Ravens began the long build-up to that year's National Football League (NFL) season, the team's public relations staff let local media know about an important event: star quarterback Joe Flacco was going to hold a news conference to discuss the upcoming season. It seemed at the time like a particularly important moment, because, in 2013, the Ravens had failed to make the American football play-offs for the first time since Flacco had arrived in Baltimore five years previously. The news conference would establish a new tone for the club.

Then, however, as Ron Fritz of *The Baltimore Sun* tells it, the story changed² – not because of something that happened to Flacco, but because the team published a story under the news section of its website ahead of the session with reporters. It was an exclusive interview with the quarterback, giving an upbeat assessment of the Ravens and a new offensive scheme.³ In essence, the team had scooped the media ahead of its own news conference. When Fritz – head of sports for *The Baltimore Sun* – complained to team officials that that wasn't playing fair, violating the traditional 'We ask the questions, you give the answers' formula of journalism, the response from the Ravens, he said, was that they were trying to drive traffic to their website just like any for-profit entity, including the news media.

Now move ahead to 8 September 2014. The Ravens and the NFL were overwhelmed with negative publicity that day when a security video obtained by the website TMZ Sports was released that showed running back Ray Rice knocking out his then fiancé and now wife, Janay, with one punch in the lift of an Atlantic City casino.⁴ The video caused an uproar, transcending the sports pages and

sparkling a national discussion in the United States about domestic violence.⁵ Coverage on ESPN, the broadcast giant of American sports media, was virtually constant, and the Ravens dropped Rice. The approach to the scandal on Baltimore's team website was muted, however. Videos, since removed, were posted of coach John Harbaugh facing the media, a news conference that was broadcast live nationally by ESPN, among others, and of several sombre players expressing their shock and personal support for Rice. By the time the team competed in the NFL play-offs in January 2015, all that remained of those moments on BaltimoreRavens.com was an interview transcript file.⁶

A review of the website's archive shows that the Rice firing – the top story in all US sports coverage that day – was handled in text with a short statement: 'The Ravens terminated the contract of running back Ray Rice on Monday afternoon. NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell also announced that based on new video evidence that became available today, he has indefinitely suspended Rice. Rice was previously serving a two-game suspension. Ravens Head Coach John Harbaugh is scheduled to speak with the media today at 7:15 p.m.'⁷

Put these two moments back to back, and they frame a rising concern among American sports journalists: teams covering themselves through their own websites, and pitching that material as virtually indistinguishable from the mainstream media's work. In one case the Baltimore team undercut local media to put out what amounted to a good news story, while in the other it handled a major scandal with little more than a media advisory in text.

'It's just a whole new ball game,' Fritz says – and, to journalists, a disturbing one.

Why it matters

The reality is that teams in the nation's four major professional sports leagues (American football, baseball, ice hockey and men's basketball), along with top college athletic programmes, have an increasingly robust web presence. Although news companies worry about the financial consequences when fans turn primarily to team sites for information – the general wisdom being that, the fewer the clicks, the harder it is to attract advertisers – reporters and editors insist that their dissatisfaction runs deeper than money.

Teams and leagues are bound to produce content with an edge of favouritism, even if only in the editorial choices they make, editors argue. Readers need to know that, they say. 'You can't be part of the story and report the story – another tenet we all know as journalists,' says Gerry Ahern, vice president of content for *USA Today Sports*. 'The notion that teams or schools or leagues can cover themselves and do so in an unbiased fashion is – you know, the Ray Rice situation was empirical evidence that that's just not gonna happen.'⁸

The product on many team websites, journalists say, is content that reads more like spin than news. 'It's the difference between reading propaganda and information,' says Vicki Michaelis, the John Huland Carmical Distinguished Professor in Sports Journalism at the University of Georgia.⁹ Readers may scoff and believe that, since the subject is sports, it means that this issue doesn't matter, Michaelis said, but even a quick run-through of major scandals in America's massive sports industry reveals that its 'Keep it inside the team' culture can cause problems to fester. Now, with the teams and institutions covering themselves, a cloistered group becomes even more closed, and journalists' work is that much tougher. The issue has become of enough concern that the Associated Press Sports Editors, the major body of sports editors in the United States, is devoting a general session to the topic at its annual convention in June.¹⁰ 'Shouldn't we be learning the unfiltered truth?' Michaelis asks.¹¹

Of course, the Ravens' digital wing doesn't see itself as corrupting American journalism, just fighting for clicks. Local television and newspapers 'are competitors in so much as we are all vying for the same fan eyeballs and, in some cases, the same advertisers. And those advertising dollars are limited. We must have compelling content to keep readers coming back to then secure advertisers,' says Michelle Andres, vice president of digital media and broadcasting for the Ravens.¹² 'The purpose of our site is to serve our fans first and foremost with the best, most compelling, timely coverage – news and otherwise – we can produce or get access to,' she says, adding that the site's focus exclusively on the Ravens is a selling point. 'Are there things we will cover differently because we are the team? Of course. But, we work hard to write legitimate, fair, honest, compelling, timely content, just like any other news outlet.'

Impact of team reporters

The idea of having reporters from the team work right alongside mainstream journalists is aggravating to the independent media. Why? To illustrate, put yourself in the position of a reporter writing the story for a National Basketball Association (NBA) game, which ends late and pushes print deadlines. Josh Robbins, president of the Professional Basketball Writers Association, describes the scenario: 'One of the things our members are finding is that a team will hire its own reporter, and that reporter will attend a post-game press conference, and, even if the team loses a game by a wide margin, the question that that reporter might throw to the coach is "Well, how happy are you with how your players battled?"'¹³

Such easy questions – 'softballs', in American parlance – mean that independent reporters don't get good information about what's wrong with the team, and then neither does the public.

To understand further why this causes such outrage among reporters, imagine the same scenario moved into a political setting. Would it be acceptable if, after a major piece of legislation had failed, a state governor held a 10-minute news conference for the mainstream media at which an operative

from a website owned by the governor's political party asked two of the questions? That, journalists argue, is what sports teams are doing all the time. 'The team,' Robbins says, 'is stacking the deck. And it's a tremendous problem.'

When the Atlanta Falcons reported to training camp last summer – an annual ritual of American football that occurs roughly six weeks before the regular season – D. Orlando Ledbetter, president of the Pro Football Writers of America in 2014, and his colleagues counted 13 media people from the team.¹⁴ 'Website folks, camera people, tweet people and writers from the website,' Ledbetter recalls. 'And from mainstream media there was three of us: *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* [Ledbetter himself], AP [Associated Press] and ESPN.com. 'So they were going to great lengths to cover themselves in a flowery way, all positives, happy-go-lucky stuff – "Jim Bob arrived at camp today". Nothing newsy.'

When there is transactional news – such as a signing or trade – the team's media operation routinely publishes and tweets first with its own angle and then calls the mainstream press, he says. As with the NBA, team website employees join in NFL news conferences, Ledbetter says. And his working life can be made that much more difficult during the open locker room periods throughout the practice week leading up to games, when players are to be made available to reporters, because the team's public relations people will often move into a spot to listen in on interviews.

Put another way, an employee (the player) will be talking to a reporter with a representative of his employer standing close by. 'There's a chilling effect of having those [PR] people around,' Ledbetter says. 'There's an attempt to control the message that's getting out.' This means that journalists have to do more work outside team headquarters, or even the playing arena, which reporters say are diminishing as places to get worthwhile material. Agents have become more important sources for news on signings, hirings and firings, but, inevitably, they have their own

agenda. ‘It should trouble everyone who works within the sports journalism industry,’ says Robbins, who writes for the *Orlando Sentinel*, talking about the overall effects of team self-coverage. ‘And it should trouble everyone who consumes pro[fessional] basketball journalism as well, because it is colouring everything that is done, and it’s colouring everything that independent journalists are attempting to do.’¹⁵

Switching sides

Despite their complaints, however, journalists do not necessarily begrudge those who take jobs with teams and leagues. They understand that people have to make personal and financial decisions, and that frequently these people have a background in daily journalism. Andres notes that one writer for the Ravens is a former *Baltimore Sun* columnist – just one of many examples throughout American sports. Some journalists also draw a distinction of sorts between league sites, which they say tend to be somewhat more objective, because they represent all the teams, and locally based team sites target home town fans. Major League Baseball, for instance, has regional editing desks to which copy is sent.

There is strong evidence, however, that writing for a team or a league can come with special pitfalls not found in mainstream media. The website Deadspin – a popular US blog that describes itself as ‘sports news without access, favor or discretion’ – reported in October 2014 that Chris Bianchi, a reporter employed by the website of Major League Soccer (MLS) to cover the Colorado Rapids, was fired after he had answered a fan’s question on Twitter by saying that the Rapids’ top executives were more to blame for a bad Colorado season than the coaching staff.¹⁶ The Deadspin piece included a testy exchange between team president Tim Hinchey and Bianchi, the clear implication being that, angry about Bianchi’s tweet, Hinchey pushed to get him fired. Bianchi and an MLS spokesman both declined to comment further on the Deadspin article, which included

claims in the comments section that other reporters had faced similar treatment while covering the league.

Media failures and possible solutions

When it comes to responding to teams covering themselves, sometimes the independent media don't do themselves any favours. Take the case of Josh Shaw, a starting football player for the University of Southern California (USC), an institute that, like scores of others in the United States, has a large, well-funded and popular sports programme. In late August 2014 the school put out a story on its sports blog to the effect that Shaw had injured both ankles leaping off a balcony to save his seven-year-old nephew from drowning in the pool at an apartment complex.¹⁷ Fox Sports and the Associated Press each picked up on the tale with stories that did not question the account, or even attribute the source to a team website in the first few paragraphs.¹⁸ Within hours USC began to get calls questioning the story, and it quickly became apparent that Shaw was lying; he had got hurt in a fall, but not a heroic one. The mainstream media, operating in an environment of constant competition, had already repeated the false tale, however.

To Ahern, of *USA Today*, there is a cautionary lesson in such cases: the media need to treat the material released by team websites with the same scepticism that they would bring to a government news release or a police report. Failing to confirm or refute independently such stories only damages the mainstream media's credibility. 'I think this is a hugely important point in today's 24/7 news cycle, where everybody's running and gunning to get that quick post-up,' Ahern says. 'I think that speed-to-market notion puts us in some potential jeopardy, because sometimes people that are in that rush to match entity X are skipping steps, and that's pretty scary to an editor or anybody who really takes pride in protecting our business and our brands and our profession.'¹⁹ For editors, putting more emphasis on credibility, as well as stressing to readers that their organisation will

report all the news about the local team, whether it's good or bad, may well be a way to compete in the face of what is likely to be an increasing flow of team-generated content.

Ahern is also part of an effort to get major American colleges to offer more access to their athletic teams – or, at least, not less access. He is a representative from the Associated Press Sports Editors (the nationwide body of sports editors) on a committee that also includes representatives of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (which governs US college sports) and the group that represents the sports information officers at American universities. These low-key conference calls and meetings are aimed at rolling back measures that the press sees as particularly draconian, and that, Ahern says, have worked to defuse some situations that otherwise could have evolved into public spats, and hardened positions.

The media stance going into those college-level talks, and with regard to professional leagues, is basically this. Many colleges and universities in the United States are public institutions, and even the private ones receive federal funding. The professional leagues and teams, meanwhile, benefit from stadiums built with public money, from police and emergency services to get fans in and out of the ballpark safely and from the enormous goodwill of those supporters. As a result, teams need to play fair with the media in terms of access and website competition, because the press represents the public. And the public deserves the straight story about the teams they love and pay for.

Final thoughts

Naturally, the media understand that their calls to the better nature of wealthy and powerful organisations such as professional teams, leagues and major universities will, in many cases, go unheeded.

For reporters trying to do their jobs effectively and stay relevant in the current sports media landscape, then, here are three simple practices based on research for this story, my 22 years with

the Associated Press and my work as a journalism professor at Pennsylvania State University. They are aimed at helping reporters break news on the beat.

- Be the tough one. Source development is always a challenge on any beat, and, with players often available only at certain designated times, the chance to break the ice and foster a relationship can be increasingly difficult. My personal observation is that many reporters take the route of being overly complimentary to coaches, players and other team officials, in the hope that one day they will be given a scoop as a reward. As this contribution has demonstrated, however, teams have their own media strategy: go right to the public and ignore the media. Smart reporters should therefore abandon the ‘nice guy’ approach and ask hard-nosed questions, even if they irritate the sources, for three reasons. First, it is journalists’ role to be independent and sceptical. Second, tough questions elicit the most newsworthy responses. Third, in any sports organisation there are disgruntled people, particularly in an unsuccessful sports organisation; being a fair, engaged, independent journalist signals to sources who don’t think they’ve received a fair deal that there is someone they can talk to.
- Work outside the lines I. As Ledbetter notes, access to players and coaches inside team headquarters is limited and monitored closely. This means that reporters must work outside the building, setting up interviews off premises when possible and catching stars – who rarely grant such individual access – at moments when they are in public, such as charity events (US players often have foundations) or when they are appearing on behalf of a corporate sponsor.
- Work outside the lines II. The most important thing that sports writers can keep in mind is that the results of competition are, ultimately, not the most important journalistic aspect of sports. Reporting on the way sports are run, the Rice case being one small example,²⁰ is critical to the press fulfilling its watchdog role in society. In the United States, where many colleges with large sports programmes are public institutions whose records are open to scrutiny, it is crucial that independent media covering a team have someone on staff who can lead efforts to obtain

records.²¹ Help is also available through the journalists' group Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE), which has focused on sports on several occasions over the years. A recent IRE podcast outlined successes in the use of records to blow the lid off a scandal at the US Air Force Academy, examine the driving records of football players at Ohio State University and review the work of team physicians.²² Finally, the enormous financial resources devoted to sports (an estimated US\$67.7 billion in revenue in North America alone by 2017)²³ demands that journalists and journalism organisations cover sports for what it is, at least to a large extent – and that is a business beat. College journalism departments can help train the next generation of reporters in this area.²⁴

Given the media landscape, it is inevitable that sports coverage will continue to evolve in the coming years, but, by taking a tough, sceptical approach to the beat, developing sources other than in team or corporate headquarters, making better use of open records and developing expertise in business reporting, journalists will do a better job for the public.

Notes

¹ John Affleck is Knight Chair in Sports Journalism and Society at Pennsylvania State University.

² Author interview with Ron Fritz, *The Baltimore Sun*.

³ BaltimoreRavens.com, 'Joe Flacco offers opinion of Gary Kubiak's offense', 29 May 2014, www.baltimoreravens.com/news/article-1/Joe-Flacco-Offers-Opinion-Of-Gary-Kubiaks-Offense/134b3f78-3c8f-4663-ae53-d57a9280a738.

⁴ SB Nation, 'A complete timeline of the Ray Rice assault case', 28 November 2015, <http://www.sbnation.com/nfl/2014/5/23/5744964/ray-rice-arrest-assault-statement-apology-ravens>

⁵ See for example, CBS News, 'Ray Rice scandal: How people are reacting', 8 September 2014, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/reaction-to-ray-rice-suspension-spans-a-range-of-anger/>

⁶ Original files seen by author in October 2014. BaltimoreRavens.com, 'Ravens Monday transcripts', 8 September 2014, www.baltimoreravens.com/news/article-1/Ravens-Monday-Transcripts/186b86cc-ccb-d417d-a6e8-18997834cbf4.

⁷ BaltimoreRavens.com, 'Ravens terminate Ray Rice's contract', 8 September 2014, www.baltimoreravens.com/news/article-1/Ravens-Terminate-Ray-Rices-Contract/17178ebd-005f-4176-b1cb-d6acd8980be4.

⁸ Author interview with Gerry Ahern, *USA Today*, Sports.

⁹ Author interview with Vicki Michaelis, University of Georgia.

¹⁰ Associated Press Sports Editors Conference, 24 -27 June 2015, San Diego, <http://apsportseditors.org/conference-2015/>.

¹¹ Supra n.9.

¹² Author interview, via e-mail, with Michelle Andres, vice president of digital media and broadcasting for the Baltimore Ravens.

¹³ Author interview with Josh Robbins, president of the Professional Basketball Writers Association.

¹⁴ Author interview with D. Orlando Ledbetter, president of the Pro Football Writers of America.

¹⁵ Supra n.13.

¹⁶ Deadspin (US), 'Former MLS reporter: team pushed to get me fired', 20 October 2014, <http://screamer.deadspin.com/former-colorado-rapids-reporter-team-pushed-to-get-me-1647752540>.

¹⁷ USCTrojans.com (US), 'Shaw suffers injury while rescuing nephew', 25 August 2014, originally at www.usctrojans.com/blog/2014/08/shaw-injured.html (since removed). See also *Washington Post* (US), 'The bizarre case of Josh Shaw's sprained ankles, a drowning nephew and a baffled USC football team', 27 August 2014, www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/08/27/the-bizarre-case-of-josh-shaws-sprained-ankles-a-drowning-nephew-and-a-baffled-usc-football-team.

¹⁸ Fox Sports (US), 'USC starting CB Josh Shaw injures both ankles saving nephew from pool', 25 August 2014, originally at www.foxsports.com/college-football/story/usc-trojans-josh-shaw-suffers-injury-saving-nephew-082514 (since removed); *Daily News* (US), 'USC CB Josh Shaw leaps from balcony to save 7-year-old nephew from drowning, sprains both ankles', 25 August 2014, www.nydailynews.com/sports/more-sports/usc-cb-josh-shaw-jumps-balcony-save-drowning-nephew-sprains-ankles-article-1.1916583; *Huffington Post* (US), 'Josh Shaw jump saves nephew', www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/25/josh-shaw-jumps-saves-nephew_n_5713047.html.

¹⁹ Supra n.8.

²⁰ ESPN (US), 'Rice case: purposeful misdirection by team, scant investigation by NFL', 19 September 2014, http://espn.go.com/espn/otl/story/_/id/11551518/how-ray-rice-scandal-unfolded-baltimore-ravens-roger-goodell-nfl.

²¹ Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press; see website: <https://www.foia.org/#!>.

²² Investigative Reporters and Editors (US), sports podcast, 'Policing the players', 3 October 2014, www.ire.org/blog/ire-radio/2014/10/03/ire-radio-podcast-policing-players.

²³ Bloomberg (US), 'Sports revenue to reach \$67.7 Billion by 2017, PwC report says', 13 November 2013, www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-11-13/sports-revenue-to-reach-67-7-billion-by-2017-pwc-report-says.html.

²⁴ It is worth noting that Pennsylvania State University has offered an introduction to the sports industry for years within the College of Communications and offering a course specifically about writing on sports business in the spring of 2015.