Introduction to This Special Issue of IJSC on 21st-Century Sport Communication Professionals

Research falling under the broad field of sport communication has become commonplace in academic scholarship over the past 30 years. Scholars in fields such as journalism, communication, communication studies, sport studies, sport management, and sport sociology, among others, have contributed to the burgeoning research in this relatively new genre. However, the majority of those studies focused on analyzing published content from a variety of mediums (e.g., Internet, print, television). Some of these scholars attempted to ascribe motives, attitudes, views, opinions, bias, and so on to the sport journalists and gatekeepers who produce and oversee sport-media content. A more sensible approach, but one that has been far less utilized, would be to study the actual producers of such content, rather than just inferring motives based on published content.

Scholarship on sport-media professionals is especially needed now due to the advent of the Internet as a dominant medium and the increased demand for convergent media skills (e.g., print reporting, shooting video, appearing on camera, production) in most current sport communication positions, regardless of the medium. Fortunately, many scholars are now researching sport communication professionals throughout the world, as is evident by the interest in this special issue.

Authors and external reviewers for this special issue were based out of Australia, Canada, Germany, Great Britain, Israel, New Zealand, Scotland, Switzerland, and the United States. I am indebted to the external reviewers—listed at the conclusion of this introduction—who gave their time to anonymously review manuscripts. Their comments, critiques, and constructive criticism helped us sift through a lengthy number of submissions to select the best articles for inclusion while making all final manuscripts considerably stronger through the review process.

The most prolific scholar on modern-era sport communication professionals is arguably Marie Hardin, who directs research for the John Curley Center for Sports Journalism at the Pennsylvania State University. In this special issue, Hardin, Antunovic, Bien-Aime, and Li addressed an area lacking in the literature by surveying program directors in the fast-growing field of sport-talk radio. Hardin et al. found that few women held leadership roles in this medium and that most program directors saw little value in coverage of women’s sports.

Not surprisingly, social-media use by sport communication professionals was a popular area of exploration for submissions to this special issue. McEnnis examined the impact of citizen journalism on Twitter on British sport journalists employed in traditional mediums. The professional sport journalists recognized needs for higher professional standards due to the influx of content from nonjournalists via social and new media. Using a phenomenology inquiry to study how social media have affected Canadian and U.S. sport-media relations, Gibbs and Haynes found that
logging on to Twitter constantly throughout each day was of paramount importance to most of these professionals’ current jobs.

A pair of original research articles examines the nexus between sport journalism and public relations. Liebler and Moritz focused on how sport journalists were forced to use image-repair strategies after their collective failure in reporting on Manti Te’o’s fake ex-girlfriend. They found that writers generally assigned blame to others. In the first known study to survey traditional sport journalists’ views on sport public relations (PR) staff members, Grimmer and Kian found that German sport journalists were generally satisfied with the job performances of German Bundesliga sport PR staffers. However, relationships between journalists and PR specialists were professional and distant, and the majority of the sport PR professionals were viewed as lacking objectivity by sport journalists who interact with them on a regular basis.

Two case studies examine the influence of convergent media expectations on 21st-century sport communication professionals. McGuire and Murray found that newspaper sport reporters at two large newspapers are now expected to appear on camera as part of their jobs but that most lack adequate training to do so and still cling to the notion that they are foremost print reporters instead of multimedia specialists. Yanity conducted the first known published study that examines the new trend of professional team-sport and U.S. college-sport PR departments hiring traditional journalists who covered that team as a hybrid journalist/media relations specialist for that same team. Due to the “historic antagonism between journalists and PR practitioners,” Yanity found that juggling the two roles was very difficult for at least one person hired into one of these roles.

Three student-led research articles submitted for the special issue were worthy of publication in the International Journal of Sport Communication. For this issue, Reed surveyed the perceptions of modern-era gatekeeping among U.S. sport journalists who cover high-profile, professional team sports, finding that nearly half believe that gatekeeping had changed in multiple ways, with most attributing differences to the advent of social media’s affecting these reporters’ job routines. The other two accepted articles will be published in upcoming issues. Hahn and Cummins examined perceptions of source credibility based on the sex of reporters and athletes covered, finding that reporters of the opposite sex of the athletes they are covering (men or women) are deemed more credible if they are unattractive. Moreover, both female and male reporters were perceived to be more credible when reporting on men’s sports instead of women’s sports. Boehmer examined the impact of user interactivity on Facebook pages on sport communication professionals, finding that increases in the number of users who clicked on links is not related to higher levels of interactivity, but an increase in the number of unique visitors did correlate with higher interactivity.

Finally, a trio of industry interviews added perspectives from accomplished sport communication professionals to the special issue, while Whiteside’s review of the ESPN Nine for IX film “Let Them Wear Towels” examines the past, current, and future challenges for female sport journalists who cover men’s sports.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to International Journal of Sport Communication editor, Paul M. Pedersen, for believing in the importance of research on sport communication professionals and dedicating the space to make this possible. It was an honor to serve as the guest editor for this special issue, a
process made much easier due to Pedersen’s guidance and support. Pedersen is not only among the world’s foremost scholars in sport communication and sport management, he is also a former professional sport journalist, which undoubtedly aids his understanding of the sport communication industry. The first international journal dedicated to sport communication, *IJSC* remains the preeminent source for cutting-edge research in this genre.

My hopes are that the variety of research published in this special issue will serve as a springboard for other scholars to study sport communication professionals from all mediums throughout the world. Whereas more articles have been published in this area over recent years, it remains an area of sport communication research in desperate need of scholarship.

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