Introduction to This Special Issue of IJSC on Twitter

It is difficult to survey the sport communication landscape without seeing Twitter’s influence in some way. Take, for example, the 2012 Summer Olympics in London. NBC elected to show many of the events on tape delay in the United States, and disgruntled fans and media members adopted the #NBCFail hashtag to collectively voice their dissent. Olympic athletes were prohibited from advertising for non-Olympic sponsors just before and during the games. Many took to Twitter to voice their frustration with this rule by tweeting dissent via the #WeDemandChange and #rule40 hashtags. In addition, several Olympic athletes lost their opportunity to compete at the Olympics as a result of sending tweets that included racist and offensive language.

One of the questions I frequently encounter is, Why does Twitter matter? In the context of sports, I contend that Twitter has opened up communicative avenues for athletes, coaches, sports organization personnel, and sports media members. Consequently, it has created unique interaction opportunities between fans and athletes, while simultaneously creating trepidation and uncertainty among those responsible for managing sports organizations. Twitter’s emergence in sports has been both pervasive and rapid, and it is therefore crucial that sport communication researchers become major “players” in exploring and understanding Twitter.

I was very excited that the International Journal of Sport Communication was equally committed to Twitter’s importance, and I believe that the articles we present here stand as compelling evidence that Twitter does indeed matter. To begin, Blaszka, Burch, Frederick, Clavio, and Walsh present a content analysis of the #WorldSeries hashtag. Their article offers important considerations for sports practitioners to better understand hashtags and how they can be used to promote team objectives. Next, two interviews with sports-industry professionals are presented. Kathleen Hessert, founder and president of SportsMediaChallenge, shares her insights on Twitter’s influence in sports and offers several compelling examples of sports organizations that have made Twitter an important part of their communication arsenal. Hessert’s interview is followed by an interview with Pat Donahue, social-media coordinator with the Los Angeles Kings. The Kings received significant publicity during the 2011–12 NHL season for their Twitter activity, and Donahue talks Twitter strategy, evaluation, and lessons learned.

Our research articles begin with Lebel and Danylchuk’s analysis of professional tennis players’ self-presentation on Twitter. Their analysis contends that Twitter provides a way to reimagine women’s sports, and with the ability of users to filter content, stereotypical notions of women athletes no longer need to be passively accepted. The next piece, by Frederick, Lim, Clavio, and Walsh, makes an important contribution on the parasocial–social continuum in following athletes on Twitter. Their article provides a picture of media-user populations that will be a valuable resource for future research on Twitter and social–parasocial interaction.

The next piece, by Browning and Sanderson, identifies reasons that student-athletes use Twitter and how they respond to critical tweets. Student-athletes have
become prominent Twitter users, and while it can be beneficial for them, it also opens up avenues for fans to castigate them, and these kinds of interaction warrant both attention and training from college athletic departments. The final research article, by Clavio, Burch, and Frederick, presents a social-network analysis, informed by systems theory, of a Big Ten Conference football team’s Twitter community. This piece emphasizes the various constituents “talking” about a sports team via Twitter and the need for sports organization personnel to understand who is talking about them and the nature of those discussions in digital spheres. The importance of this article is evidenced by the University of Oregon launching the “Quack Cave,” a social-media command center to be involved in following and shaping the discussion that Clavio, Burch, and Frederick outline in their article. The issue concludes with a case study authored by Reichart Smith and Smith that explores hashtag use in the 2012 College World Series and identifies how Twitter enables sport communities to come together and converse with an identifiable hashtag. This capability affords social identity that extends beyond geographic boundaries.

Nearly 50 reviewers provided anonymous evaluations for the submissions to this special issue. I am indebted to these reviewers who gave of their time to review manuscripts. Their comments helped us sift through a number of submissions and made the articles we selected stronger. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to Dr. Paul Pedersen for believing in Twitter’s importance and providing space for this timely sports communication topic. *IJSC* is the preeminent place for sport communication research, and it has been an honor to serve as the editor for this special issue.

It is my sincere hope that the work presented in this special issue will be a springboard for researchers interested in studying Twitter’s role in sports. While the articles presented here are impressive, there remains much work for us to do as we strive to keep up with the evolving technological society in which we live.

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