Interactive Media and Sports Journalists

The Impact of Interactive Media on Sports Journalists

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This research studied the impact of interactive media on sports journalists. Sports journalists at daily newspapers (N=393) participated in a Web-based survey. Results indicate that sports journalists working at civic-minded newspapers do not place more value on citizen input nor do they pay more attention to sports talk radio and Internet message boards as a source of information or fan opinion. This may indicate that all sports journalists, no matter the type of newspaper they work for, embrace the input of regular citizens. The study produced one counterintuitive finding in that sports journalists employed at civic-minded newspapers reported less interaction with the public.

Although a number of studies have studied the impact of civic journalism on reporters, media content and even audience members, little research has been devoted to the non-traditional, interactive media's impact on journalists. Although several newspapers across the country have utilized the Internet to engage citizens (Bressers, 2003; Bukota, 2001; Schaffer, 2000), research that explores the Internet's impact on journalists, both civic and traditional, is lacking. What influence does interactive media such as Internet message boards and talk radio discussions have on journalists and how they perform their jobs?

Because of the high number of interactive media opportunities for sports fans, including more than 600 sports talk radio stations nationwide (Eastman, 2004) and a plethora of fan-based

message boards on the Internet (Strickland, 2004), the authors chose to focus on sports journalists for this research study. In fact, "just about every team in every sport has (Web) sites dedicated to the opinion of fans" (Strickland, 2004, p. 1C). There are also indications that sports journalists pay attention to interactive forms of media. Some sports writers document fan support by referring to callers' comments and predictions on sports talk radio programs (Bruscas & Skolnik, 2003; Conley, 2003; Vargas, 2003; White, 2002). Others refer to information posted on sports Internet message boards and correspondence with readers conducted via e-mail (Hruby, 2003; Strickland, 2004; Tramel, 2003). One sports columnist wrote, "Through the newfound wonders of e-mail, radio shows and street corners, I correspond with fans like never before" (Tramel, 2003, p. 1C). Some newspapers even invite fan participation by encouraging readers to "call the sports editor" or give reader feedback ("Call the sports editor," 2002, p. B2; Jaworski, 2003; "Reader feedback," 2003).

Although civic journalism has been studied mostly through a political lens, the authors believe that athletics also offers an opportunity to engage community members and increase citizen participation in public life. Peck (1999), for one, argues that "sports should have a civic-journalism component" (¶ 102) because focusing only on politics misses large swaths of the public: What he calls "small 'c' civic journalism" (¶ 101) is about bringing "interactivity and connection with community to every section of the paper where different readers can be found" (¶ 99). From professional basketball to peewee football, athletics often deals with important societal issues, including education, drug use, and violence. Will the revelation that major league baseball players use steroids influence young athletes to do the same? Should college athletes be paid to play sports? Should children under age 10 be allowed to play peewee football? These are just a few examples of sports-related issues that can stimulate debate and engage community members. As Lapchick (2003) notes, "Sport, from youth sports through the pros, has a role to play in leadership and public discourse" (p. 79).

Furthermore, sports engage community members by building civic engagement, pride, and identity within nations and communities. Boyle and Haynes (2000) describe sports fans as carrying "a badge of identity" (p. 13) that connects personal identity to collective identity and to cultural markers such as religion, nationality and politics. Long and Sanderson (2001) emphasize the benefits of athletics to communities including increased pride, cohesion, and collective identity in the community. A study by Sorek (2003) emphasizes how athletics can be used to encourage discourse among various groups. In his research on Arab soccer players in Israel, Sorek found that various groups, including fans, players, bureaucrats, and media cooperated to construct an integrative community within the general Israeli public sphere. Other researchers have emphasized the opportunities sports often provide to marginalized and excluded minorities (Hartmann, 2003; Lapchick, 2003).

The previously mentioned sampling of sports pages across the nation indicates that non-traditional, interactive media may influence media gatekeepers in the sports domain. In addition, because of the proliferation of sports talk radio stations and sports Internet message boards and the fact that athletics often overlaps with community issues and societal problems, sports journalism was selected as the lens through which to explore the impact of non-traditional, interactive media on both civic and traditional journalists. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the impact of interactive media on sports media gatekeepers and compare interactive media's influence on sports journalists who work at more civic-minded newspapers with those sports journalists who work at more traditional newspapers.

Literature Review

Civic Journalism

The civic journalism movement began in the late 1980s and early 1990s because of some journalists' dissatisfaction with the

profession (Charity, 1995). These journalists thought the profession "ought to make it as easy as possible for citizens to make intelligent decisions about public affairs and to get them carried out" (p. 2). There are a number of definitions of civic journalism, which is also referred to as "public" or "citizen-based" journalism. Fouhy (1996) describes the process as a way for members of the news media to "reconnect to their communities so they can engage citizens in dialogues that lead to problem solving" (as cited in Eksterowicz, 2000, p. 3). Rosen (1999) defines civic journalism as:

An approach to the daily business of the craft that calls on journalists to (1) address people as citizens, potential participants in public affairs, rather than victims or spectators; (2) help the political community act upon, rather than just learn about, its problems; (3) improve the climate of public discussion, rather than simply watch it deteriorate; (4) help make public life go well, so that it earns its claim on our attention (p. 22).

Everette (1995) argues that civic journalism "urges local news media to take a more active role by encouraging greater public involvement with public problems and setting the public agenda, as well as leading public debate" (p. 48). Still others, like Fouhy and Schaffer (1995), define civic journalism as "initiatives which make a deliberative attempt to reach out to citizens, to listen to them, and to have citizens listen and talk to each other (as cited in Voakes, 1999, p. 757). Apostles of the movement also believe that civic journalism "represents an attempt to connect journalists with the communities in which they operate. It places citizen input at the center of journalistic concerns" (Eksterowicz, Roberts & Clark, 1998, p. 74).

Critics of civic journalism point to the movement's lack of a clear definition. These "traditional" journalists, as they are often called, also have problems with the notion that journalists should operate more as advocates and cheerleaders and less like watchdogs. Some believe that civic journalism also sacrifices journalists' objectivity (Eksterowicz, 2000), and still others

believe the concept is nothing more than a marketing gimmick that focuses entirely too much on pandering to a fickle public for financial gain (Corrigan, 1999). Despite a number of critics, the Pew Center has funded more than 400 public journalism projects across the nation (Bloomquist & Zukin, 1997).

Since its implementation in the early 1990s, civic journalism has been studied by a number of researchers. As stated earlier, the bulk of the research has focused on the differences in content between civic media and traditional media, journalists' attitudes about civic journalism and civic journalism's effects on audiences. In a national survey of newspaper journalists, Voakes (1999) discovered strong support for practices associated with civic journalism. Arant and Meyer (1998) found just the opposite in their survey of newspaper staff members at U.S. daily newspapers. Despite the high number of civic journalism projects that have been implemented across the nation over the past 15 years, few journalists in the Arant and Meyer study said they strayed from traditional journalistic practices. McDevitt, Gassaway and Perez (2002) surveyed both college students and professional journalists and discovered that students' commitment to civic journalism often fades once they acquire jobs as professional journalists. Massey and Haas (2002) evaluated 47 civic journalism studies and determined that civic journalism practices had limited effects on journalists' attitudes and behaviors.

Researchers have also studied media content as a dependent variable in civic journalism projects. McGregor, Fountaine and Comrie (2000) compared the content of both traditional and civic newspapers during the 1993 and 1996 general election campaigns in New Zealand and found that newspapers that had implemented civic journalism projects covered more policy issues, focused less on personalities, were less negative, and were less likely to cover the campaign from a "horse-race" perspective. Maier and Potter (2001) studied television broadcasters and how they covered the 1996 election campaigns in the United States. The researchers discovered that those broadcasters that

claimed to practice civic journalism devoted more time to policy issues and less to election polls, but the differences in coverage were small and fell short of statistical significance. Both Kurpius (2002) and Massey (1996) studied source diversity at newspapers and television stations that were involved in civic journalism projects. Both researchers found evidence of increased source diversity. Because one of the goals of civic journalism is to influence audience members to become engaged in society, a number of studies have researched audience effects, although a number have found conflicting results (Bloomquist & Zukin, 1997; Massey & Haas, 2002; Newby, 1997; Simmons, 1999).

Clearly, technologies like talk radio and the Internet that make it easier for citizens to communicate with each other and with members of the media help facilitate the notion of civic journalism. However, even though various civic journalism projects funded by the Pew Center have utilized technology, interactive media such as e-mail and Internet message boards, few empirical studies have studied the impact of interactive media on journalists. Kurpius and Mendelson (2002) content analyzed telephone calls to C-SPAN's "Washington Journal" program and found that 27 percent of callers introduced new conversation topics. However, no empirical research was located that dealt with the impact of interactive media on journalists. Anecdotal evidence does exist for interactive media's role in the civic journalism process. The *Everett Herald* newspaper used the Internet to engage citizens on a proposed waterfront plan and reported that 1,500 of the 2,000 responses came via the Internet (Bukota, 2001). Bukota also found that following the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, reporters at the *Spokesman-Review* used reader e-mails for input into stories on the local economy and what military action the United States should take.

Gatekeeping

The key concept behind civic journalism is that citizens and those in the community will have input into what gets covered

by members of the news media, therefore they will have influence on media gatekeepers and what items media gatekeepers choose to cover. The gatekeeping process, as applied to news media, can be traced back to a study by White (1950), who studied how wire service editors selected news items. White found that Mr. Gates, the last in a chain of media gatekeepers, used specific criteria in selecting which stories would be included in the wire service. White's study, which has spawned numerous studies over the years, was the first to look at the journalist's role as a person that decides what others should know. Therefore, gatekeeping, as applied to civic journalism, emphasizes the influence of citizens on media gatekeepers. Thus, it can be concluded that citizens will have more influence on gatekeepers employed at civic newspapers as opposed to gatekeepers employed at traditional newspapers.

But citizens are not the only ones who influence gatekeepers. Shoemaker and Reese (1991) state that a variety of factors influence gatekeepers' selections including personal interest, work routines and newsroom norms, interpersonal communication and public relations specialists. Technology, particularly interactive media, has made it easier for newsmakers, public relations specialists and common citizens to have immediate access to not only journalists, but other citizens, and with access comes the potential for influence. Several researchers have studied the impact of interactive media on online media gatekeepers (Livingston & Bennett, 2003; Singer 2006a). Singer (2006b) says the traditional idea of a gatekeeper no longer exists and that journalists no longer control what information citizens receive. Singer refers to today's journalists not as gatekeepers but as "sense-makers" who interpret for citizens "what is both credible and valuable" (p. 12). As Singer (2006a) points out "The Internet defies the whole notion of a 'gate' and challenges the idea that journalists…should limit what passes through it" (p. 265).

It appears that journalists are adjusting their role as gatekeepers (Singer, 2006a; Singer, 2006b), and nowhere is this more evi-

dent than in the area of sports, where sportswriters and editors often encourage fans to provide feedback and discuss sports issues with them and with one another. A review of sports pages across the nation over the last few years reveals that sports journalists have embraced this re-defined role of gatekeeper, one in which readers have input into how the day's sports events and issues are covered.

Interactive Media and Sports Journalists

In the sports domain, one can find a number of instances in which interactive media, such as sports talk radio and sports Internet message boards, has impacted gatekeepers. For example, while some sports writers refer to callers' comments as "polluting the airwaves" ("Sports buzz," 2002), others document fan support by referring to callers' comments and predictions on sports talk radio programs (Bruscas & Skolnik, 2003; Conley, 2003; Vargas, 2003; White, 2002). Occasionally, a sports writer even compliments sports talk radio hosts and callers, as one writer did following a number of radio tributes to the late Los Angeles Lakers' broadcaster Chick Hearn (Lev, 2002). Information posted on sports Internet message boards and correspondence conducted via the convenience of e-mail may also influence what sports journalists write about (Hruby, 2003; Tramel, 2003).

Some sports columnists admit to the influence of technology and sports fans' input in their writing. In fact, one sports columnist wrote, "the best thoughts come from readers" (Tramel, 2003, p. 2C). Some newspapers invite fan participation by encouraging readers to "call the sports editor" or give reader feedback ("Call the sports editor," 2002, p. B2; Jaworski, 2003; "Reader feedback," 2003). The best comments are used in future editions of the newspaper. In addition, a study with sports journalists at daily newspapers indicated that sports journalists use interactive media to gauge what sports fans are talking about and interested in. A few also admitted to getting story ideas from some of these

discussions (Wigley, 2004). From this sampling of sports pages and comments from sports journalists across the nation it appears that non-traditional, interactive media, such as sports talk radio and sports Internet message boards have changed the way sports journalists operate while also increasing the influence that readers and listeners have on these journalists.

Hypotheses

The tenets of civic journalism propose that journalists and gatekeepers pay close attention to public opinion and engage the public in discussions on various problems and issues. Some researchers have even extolled the benefits of interactive media, such as the Internet, in furthering the mission of civic journalism (Bressers, 2003; Bukota, 2001; Payne, 2003). In fact, the Pew Center's Web site emphasizes that civic journalists should practice interacting in useful ways with readers, viewers and listeners, tap into the concerns of various stakeholders, and make use of the Internet to involve citizens (http://www.pewcenter.org/batten/enter.html).

Clearly, a proliferation of both sports talk radio stations and sports Internet message boards offer sports fans a dialogue with the media and each other like never before. Even though sports journalists do not refer to their work as "civic" journalism, it could be argued that what many sports journalists are practicing meets the Pew Center's definition of civic journalism. As mentioned earlier, Peck (1999) argued that civic journalism should not be confined to government issues or the city desk, but should be a part of every department in the newsroom, including sports. Therefore, because sports offers fans numerous opportunities to engage and interact with each other and members of the media like never before, and because both anecdotal evidence and previous research indicates that sports journalists often utilize such interactive media in the course of their profession, the following hypotheses were proposed:

H_1: Sports journalists employed by civic-minded newspapers will place greater value on the interests and opinions of sports fans than sports journalists employed by newspapers that do not subscribe to a civic-minded form of journalism.

H_2: Sports journalists employed by civic-minded newspapers will report paying greater attention to public opinion vis-à-vis talk radio than sports journalists employed by newspapers that do not subscribe to a civic-minded form of journalism.

H_3: Sports journalists employed by civic-minded newspapers will report paying more attention to public opinion vis-à-vis sports Internet message boards than sports journalists employed by newspapers that do not subscribe to a civic-minded form of journalism.

H_4: Sports journalists employed by civic-minded newspapers will report that sports talk radio is a greater source of information than sports journalists employed by newspapers that do not subscribe to a civic-minded form of journalism.

H_5: Sports journalists employed by civic-minded newspapers will report that sports Internet message boards are a greater source of information than sports journalists employed by newspapers that do not subscribe to a civic-minded form of journalism.

H_6: Sports journalists employed by civic-minded newspapers will report more interaction with the public vis-à-vis talk radio than sports journalists employed by newspapers that do not subscribe to a civic-minded form of journalism.

H_7: Sports journalists employed by civic-minded newspapers report will more interaction with the public vis-à-vis sports Internet message boards than sports journalists employed by newspapers that do not subscribe to a civic-minded form of journalism.

Methodology

Selection of Subjects

A Web-based survey was selected for the study not only because of convenience and cost, but also because it was the most appropriate method for a study dealing with interactive media. A purposive sample of subjects was selected from Editor and Publisher's online directory of daily newspapers. The Editor and Publisher directory was used because it is the most well-known, respected and credible reference source about the newspaper industry (Singer, Tharp & Haruta, 1998). Sports journalists at all daily newspapers that listed an e-mail address were selected for participation in the study. Because so many of the daily newspapers did not include the e-mail addresses of sports journalists, the researchers accessed Web sites of the daily newspapers and searched for the e-mail addresses of all sports editors and reporters. Sports copy editors and sports photographers were not included in the study. In all, a total of 3,383 sports journalists were e-mailed and asked to participate in the study during spring and summer 2004. Of that number, 362 e-mails were returned because of bad e-mail addresses or identified as duplicate e-mail addresses. This resulted in a sampling frame of 3,021. Of that number, 393 sports journalists participated in the online survey, for a total response rate of 13%. Although the response rate appears low, previous published research has shown response rates for Web-based surveys as low as seven percent and as low as six percent for e-mail surveys (Schonlau, Fricker & Elliott, 2001). A number of research studies have indicated that online or Internet-based surveys traditionally generate lower response rates than traditional mail or phone surveys (Northey, 2005; Sax, Gilmartin, & Bryant, 2003). One researcher has attributed the low response rates often seen in online surveys to respondents' suspicions about who is administering the survey and the confidentiality of their responses (Sax, Gilmartin, & Bryant, 2003). Additionally, of the 393 responses, 34 indicated they were em-

ployed by civic-minded newspapers and 238 indicated they were employed by traditional newspapers. Six respondents chose not to reveal the names of their employers. The results appear to reflect the extent of civic journalism practiced in the real world. For example, a Pew Center study by Friedland and Nichols (2002) found that nearly one-fifth of U.S daily newspapers practiced some form of civic journalism. The results of this study found that just under 15% of respondents reported working at newspapers that had practiced some form of civic journalism in the past.

For this study, the e-mail message sent to sports journalists included a link to the survey's host Web site. The authors did take precautions to ensure that participants knew the e-mail message was legitimate. The subject line of the e-mail message gave the topic of the message ("sports media survey"), while the text of the message explained the survey topic, why the sports journalist was selected for participation and the approximate time needed to complete the survey. The message also included assurance of confidentiality for participants and contact information for one of the authors, including name, title, university affiliation, address, and phone number.

Measures

The independent measure was newspaper civic-mindedness. Civic-minded newspapers were identified from The Pew Center's list of previous Batten Award winners and Pew Project awardees. According to the Pew Center's Web site, the organization provides funding for civic journalism experiments in an effort to improve news reporting and re-engage people in public life. Traditional, or less civic-minded, newspapers were identified as those newspapers that did not appear on the list of either previous Batten Award winners or Pew Project awardees. According to the organization's Web site, Batten Award for Excellence in Civic Journalism was created to spotlight journalism

that is more than exemplary public-service journalism. It specifically seeks to reward journalism that tries, from the outset, to engage people in community issues and to support their involvement - active and deliberative - in the life of their community, without advocating a particular outcome. The competition is for a $25,000 cash prize, and Past Batten Award winners have developed journalism projects that interact in useful ways with readers, viewers and listeners. They also tap into the concerns of various stakeholders, engage people in considering choices and make use of the Internet to involve citizens.

These awards are now known as the Knight-Batten Awards and are administered by the J-Lab Institute for Interactive Journalism at the University of Maryland. Until 2003, the Pew Center also provided modest funding to help news organizations create and refine better ways of engaging people in public life via news reporting. Known as Pew Projects, these efforts helped support more than 120 initiatives that gave ordinary people a voice in coverage of their communities. The center shared lessons from these efforts with other journalists through workshops, publications, videos and trainings.

The dependent measures and their operationalizations were as follows:

1) The value sports journalists place on fan interests and opinions. This was assessed through two items that used response scales from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree): "I value sports fans' opinions" and "I want to know what sports fans are interested in." The correlation between the two was .55 ($p < .001$).

2) Sports journalists' attention to interactive media as an indicator of public opinion. This was assessed with three questions for each medium, all of which used scales from 1 (never) to 5 (daily): "How often do you (listen to sports talk radio/ read sports Internet message boards)?" "How often do you (listen to sports talk radio/read sports Internet message boards) to find out what sports fans are saying?" and "How often do

you (listen to sports talk radio/read sports Internet message boards) to find out what topics sports fans are interested in?" Cronbach's alphas were .87 for talk radio and .93 for message boards.

3) Sports journalists' use of interactive media as a source of ideas and information. This was measured with four questions for each medium: "How often do you get tips/inside information from (listening to sports talk radio/reading sports Internet message boards)?"; "How often do you get story ideas by (listening to sports talk radio/reading sports Internet message boards)?"; "How often have you covered a topic because it was receiving discussion on (sports talk radio/ sports Internet message boards)" and "How often do you use information from the following sources when deciding what sports stories to write about or cover?" Cronbach's alphas for the four-item indices were .86 for talk radio and .85 for message boards.

4) Sports journalists' interaction with the public through interactive media and references to ideas expressed therein. This was measured through three questions for each medium: "How often have you responded to something that was (said on sports talk radio/posted on a sports Internet message board) by (calling in/posting a response)?"; "How often have you referred to something that was said on sports talk radio/ posted on a sports Internet message board) by referring to it in a column or sports report?" and "How often you use the following methods to interact with sports fans?" Cronbach's alphas were .52 for radio and .67 for message boards.

Results

The hypotheses were tested with independent-samples t-tests to examine any differences between sports journalists employed by civic-minded newspapers and others in their approach to interactive media, such as sports talk radio and sports Internet

message boards. The results of the statistical tests are reported in Table 1.

The first hypothesis, that sports reporters from civic journalism newspapers will place more value on fans' opinions than other sports journalists, was the basis for the rest of the hypotheses, but there is no evidence of any difference. H_1 was not supported.

The second and third hypotheses contended that sports journalists at civic-minded newspapers would pay more attention to sports talk radio (H_2) and sports Internet message boards (H_3) as a source of fan opinion than would other sports journalists. Means for the civic group were slightly higher, but the difference was nowhere near significance. Neither H_2 nor H_3 were supported.

The fourth and fifth hypotheses posited that sports journalists at civic-minded newspapers would consider sports talk radio (H_4) and Internet message boards (H_5) a greater source of information than sports journalists from other newspapers. What differences there were between the groups ran counter to the hypotheses, and in any case were not large enough to be significant. Neither H_4 nor H_5 were supported.

The sixth and seventh hypotheses were that sports journalists at newspapers practicing civic journalism would interact more with the public through sports talk radio (H_6) and Internet message boards (H_7) than their counterparts at other newspapers. We found some differences here, although they were not in the predicted direction. Sports journalists at newspapers that did not subscribe to civic journalism reported significantly greater interaction with the public through Internet message boards than journalists at civic-minded newspapers, and a similar difference in interaction through sports talk radio approached significance.

Discussion

We start by addressing the non-findings for H_1 first. Based on the values espoused by civic journalism and previous studies that

TABLE 1. **Civic Journalism Newspapers vs. Others in Sports Journalists' Attitudes and Behaviors Regarding Sports Talk Radio and Internet Message Boards**

VARIABLE (RANGE)	CIVIC	others	T
Values public's opinions (Range: 2–10)	8.55 (1.42)	8.59 (1.43)	-.184
Attention to talk radio for opinions (3–15)	9.60 (3.58)	9.50 (3.65)	.188
Attention to message boards for opinions (3–15)	8.68 (3.68)	8.45 (3.51)	.456
Use of talk radio for information, ideas(4–20)	7.78 (2.48)	8.20 (3.17)	-.927
Use of message boards for information, ideas (4–20)	7.71 (2.57)	7.76 (2.87)	-.116
Interaction with talk radio (3–15)	4.35 (1.43)	4.71 (1.66)	-1.687^[a]
Interaction with message boards (3–15)	4.00 (1.19)	4.53 (1.80)	-2.694**[a]

Note. For civic group, $n = 55$ to 62. For other group, $n = 247$ to 307. Values listed are means; values in parentheses are standard deviations. Ranges for each scale (which each include two to four items using a 1-to-5 Likert-type scale) are given in parentheses.

[a] *t* value does not assume equal variances for both groups due to significance of Levene's test.

** $p < .01$ ^ $p < .10$

found differences in news content between news media implementing civic projects and traditional media, we presumed that a civic journalism ethos evidenced in the newsroom would extend to the sports desk, and that consequently sports journalists at such newspapers would value citizen opinions more than other sports journalists. Instead, it appears that sports journalists value fans' opinions highly (both means were greater than 8.5 on a scale of 2 to 10) no matter where they work. This may be a function of the nature of the beat. While political scientists have expressed alarm at the public's trend toward civic disengagement (Patterson, 2003), sports fans have remained passionately, vocally engaged. Although there are few civic journalism projects that explicitly involve sports journalists (for an exception, see Sands, 2002), sports journalists across the board may nonetheless feel compelled to listen to and interact with their fervent sports public. In other words, listening to and interacting with readers may be commonplace among all sports journalists. If so, then we might not expect significant findings between sports journalists employed by civic newspapers and those employed at other newspapers. However, can the same be said for journalists that work at the city desk and in other areas of the newsroom? Future research should look at the differences between sports journalists and news reporters in regards to civic journalism practices. Perhaps sports journalists do a better job of reaching out and interacting with the public, one of the main tenets of civic journalism, than do those journalists in the newsroom.

More pessimistically, another explanation for our null findings is that it may be that civic journalism projects don't have much long-term impact on journalists, sports or otherwise. Our data include only sports journalists, but Arant and Meyer (1998) discovered that despite the high number of civic journalism projects that have been implemented across the nation over the past 15 years, few journalists stray from traditional journalistic practices. Massey and Haas (2002) evaluated 47 civic journalism studies and determined that civic journalism practices

had limited effects on journalists' attitudes and behaviors. One explanation might be that once the media outlet's civic project is over, reporters go back to their traditional ways. If this is the case, a journalist, including a sports journalist, who works for a newspaper that once did a civic journalism project would be no more a "civic journalist" than any other, and our measure of what makes a newspaper a "civic journalism" newspaper would have little validity. If so, we would not expect to find any differences between our two groups of sports journalists.

Given the findings for H_1, it is not surprising that sports journalists at civic journalism newspapers would pay no more attention to fan opinions expressed on sports talk radio or sports Internet message boards than other sports journalists. Nor is it surprising that they do not consider these interactive media a greater source of information than their counterparts do. It is also worth noting that sports journalists as a whole were ambivalent about talk radio and message boards as indicators of fan interest. In fact there was a clear hierarchy of fan interest indicators in journalists' eyes, $F(5, 1520) = 230.05$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .43$. They viewed attendance at sporting events ($M = 4.36$ on a 1-to-5 scale, $SD = .81$) as the best indicator, followed by personal conversations with fans ($M = 4.02$, $SD = .98$), then conversations with other journalists ($M = 3.30$, SD = .96). All three were seen as better indicators than talk radio ($M = 2.95$, SD = 1.05), which in turn was higher rated than message boards ($M = 2.54$, SD = 1.07). Radio (but not message boards) was significantly better regarded than the lowest-rated indicator of fan interest, sports information directors ($M = 2.39$, SD = 1.10). All post-hoc comparisons were Bonferroni-corrected paired-samples t-tests with all t values greater than 4.7 and all p values less than .001.

The more puzzling finding was that sports journalists at less civic-oriented newspapers would interact *more* with the public through sports Internet message boards and perhaps sports talk radio. One possible explanation for this finding would be that sports journalists at civic newspapers may interact more with sports fans

through more traditional, interpersonal means such as telephone, face-to-face conversations, or even e-mail and fax. However, we measured frequency of these types of interactions as well. We created an index of these four ($\alpha = .73$) to test this explanation, and the result was similar: if anything, sports journalists from civic newspapers appear to interact with the public *less* frequently ($M = 13.02$, $SD = 3.04$) than do their counterparts from other newspapers ($M = 13.85$, $SD = 3.17$), $t\,(300) = 1.763$, $p < .10$).

This leaves us at even more of a loss to explain. These differences could be chance, but they are consistent with each other. Given our relatively low response rate, there could be a self-selection bias that affected the results here. Perhaps only the most interactive of non-civic sports journalists responded, while the civic sports journalists most committed to interacting with their communities considered this study from outside researchers irrelevant to them. An alternative perspective is that perhaps those sports journalists employed by civic newspapers feel more "in touch" with their readers and that they "have a pulse" on their audience because of the ethos of the newspaper, or because their newspapers have taken the inventory of reader interest for them through focus groups and polls. Therefore, they would feel less inclined to interact with readers and the public. Furthermore, sports journalists employed at what were categorized as less civic-oriented newspapers may interact more with readers and the public through both interactive and interpersonal channels because they feel "out of touch" and therefore need audience feedback. This begs the question: could a civic journalism ethos at newspapers actually distance reporters from their audience members by decreasing the reporters' reliance on reader input and feedback? Future research should explore this concept in-depth in both the sports and news domains.

As for the larger implications of this study, we believe the lack of significant findings between traditional and civic sports journalists is a signal that all sports journalists, regardless of what type of newspaper they work for, have embraced the input

of regular citizens. One only has to look at the overwhelming anecdotal evidence which includes numerous sports talk radio stations, sports Internet message boards, sports fan Web sites and the plethora of newspapers that invite reader comment and participation. If this is the case, it also means that readers are helping drive content, at least on the sports pages. Logically, this input should lead to more loyal readers and even increased readership because sports fans will feel listened to and empowered.

Additionally, it may be that sports journalists and gatekeepers have adapted to citizen input via interactive media because they simply could not ignore it. After all, numerous passionate, vocal fans have been discussing sports issues on sports talk radio and sports Internet message boards for more than a decade. People are passionate about sports, much more so than issues at city hall, and therefore, they want to engage in dialogue and commiserate or rejoice with others.

The largely null findings from the study could also indicate that sports journalists are performing much like Singer (2006a; 2006b) described, and thus doing a better job overall of embracing their new role as gatekeepers. Anecdotal evidence suggests sports journalists and gatekeepers are doing a good job of engaging readers in sports stories and how they are covered. Perhaps because of the nature of sports, citizens naturally have more influence on sports gatekeepers than news gatekeepers. That is why future studies should explore differences between sports and news gatekeepers based on their use of interactive media and classification as civic or traditional journalists.

Finally, if our counterintuitive finding is true that traditional journalists interact more with readers through Internet message boards and perhaps sports talk radio, this means that those sports journalists working at civic newspapers may need to remember they still must engage with the public, even though their newspaper may have been involved with a civic-journalism project in the past and may even still profess a civic-minded ethos throughout the newspaper. Sports journalists at these newspapers need

to keep in mind that a civic-minded ethos does not end there, but must involve a continued outreach to readers via dialogue, open discussions, and feedback.

Limitations of the present study include a low response rate, although it was almost double that of some previously published studies using Web-based or e-mail surveys (Schonlau, Fricker & Elliott, 2001) and closely reflected the break-down of the number of newspapers estimated to practice civic journalism nationally, according to the Pew Center. Future research should strive for an increased response rate and should utilize traditional mail or telephone surveys either alone or in combination with Web-based surveys to ensure a higher response rate. Future research also should utilize qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and focus groups with sports journalists from both traditional and civic newspapers to explore the present study's counterintuitive finding that traditional sports journalists, rather than civic sports journalists, interact more with the public through both interpersonal and interactive communication channels. Finally, it would be important for future researchers to investigate to what extent civic journalism projects affect the long-term values and behaviors of all journalists, including sports journalists, who work on them, as well as other journalists who work for that media organization.

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