The Story Versus the Stream: Digital Media’s Influence on Newspaper Sports Journalism

Brian Moritz
SUNY Oswego, USA

This study examined contemporary daily sports journalism through the lenses of media sociology and new institutional theory. In-depth interviews with 25 sports journalists (reporters and editors) identified the institutionalized norms, values, practices, and routines of American sports journalism; demonstrated how that institutionalization affects story selection; and showed how the profession is changing due to digital and social media. The interviews show that although traditional sports journalism is highly institutionalized, digital sports journalism is far less so. Traditional sports journalism is still centered around a story, and digital sports journalism follows Robinson’s journalism-as-process model. The journalists interviewed are expected to perform acts of both traditional and digital journalism during the same workday, which leads to tension in how they do their jobs.

**Keywords:** media sociology, institutionalism, digital news, social media

*Do we really need 25 people crammed in baseball locker rooms fighting for the same mundane quotes? What’s our game plan for the fact that—thanks to the Internet and 24-hour sports stations—a city like Boston suddenly has four times as many sports media members as it once had? Why are we covering teams the same way we covered them in 1981, just with more people and better equipment?*

—Bill Simmons, Grantland.com

In a series of online columns posted to Grantland.com in the summer of 2012 (Gladwell & Simmons, 2012), Bill Simmons (the site’s then-editor-in-chief) and best-selling author Malcolm Gladwell discussed the changing sports-media landscape in the digital age. Simmons, who rose to prominence in the early 2000s as a blogger on ESPN and became one of the America’s most popular sportswriters, made the point quoted above when discussing the media coverage of that year’s NBA finals.

The author is with the Communication Studies Dept., SUNY Oswego, Oswego, NY. Address author correspondence to brian.moritz@oswego.edu
Like all media, sports journalism has seen seismic changes in the early twenty-first century. The digital-media revolution, including the proliferation of social media, is changing the way sports news is produced and consumed. It is changing how sports journalists do their jobs and how they are expected to do their jobs on a day-to-day basis.

Before the 2000s, the daily sports-media landscape was easily defined—there were print and broadcast reporters representing newspapers, radio and TV stations, and magazines. By the early 2010s, the sports-media landscape included all of those reporters but also included online-only publications, bloggers (for both corporate-owned companies and independent fan-driven sites), and fans using social networks like Twitter to voice their opinions and interact with reporters and athletes themselves. Popular accounts by sports journalists describe a profession that has been irrevocably changed by the advances in digital and social media (e.g., Ballard, 2006; Dargis, 2012).

Despite this expansion of the landscape, there are many ways in which sports journalism looks exactly like it did before the emergence of digital media. Reporters still watch games in the press box, still crowd around podiums or in locker rooms for interviews with the coach and star players after the game. Game coverage consists of a game story that recaps the key plays and moments of each contest; sidebars, which are shorter stories focusing on a specific play or player; and columns in which the writer voices his or her opinion and attempts to put the game into a larger context (Siegel, 2013; Wilstein, 2002).

It is this seeming disconnect—between the changes that are evident in journalism and the continued reliance on existing routines and practices—that the Bill Simmons quote at the beginning of this article captures. The 2010s are a time when everything in media seems to be changing, and yet so much seems to stay the same. That idea expressed by Simmons forms one of the core questions facing media scholars: In the digital age, just how much has the social construction of news really changed?

The purpose of this commentary is to examine the institutionalized practices of sports journalism in the digital age. Through the use of in-depth interviews with sports journalists at newspapers across the United States and of varying circulation sizes, this study sought to discover the norms, routines, and practices that are professionally sanctioned in sports journalism. Along with identifying the routines and practices—and their consequences—this study sought to understand how, if at all, they are changing and evolving in the digital-media age. Put plainly, this study sought to understand how sports journalism in the United States is practiced in the digital era—how it is changing, how it is staying the same, and the potential consequences. The use of institutional theory, which has not been widely used in the study of news construction, allowed this research to identify institutionalized patterns in sports journalism, adding to our understanding of sports journalism. Identifying and understanding these patterns allows us to see how and the degree to which the production of sports journalism is changing due to the emergence of digital media.

This commentary will be guided by the following research question:

RQ: What changes to institutionalized sports journalism are occurring because of the growth of digital and social journalism?
Theory

This study draws from media sociology and the social construction of news, new institutionalism, and sports journalism. The social construction of news is a core part of media-sociology study. It examines how news is created and the routines, norms, practices, values, and attitudes of reporters and editors. News is a social construct, and media sociologists have studied how this construct is created for more than 60 years. The landmark research in this field (Fishman, 1980; Gans, 1979; Gitlin, 1980; Tuchman, 1980) showed that the routines reporters use, the practices they employ, and the attitudes they have shape what becomes news. News is not something that is discovered in the field.

Recent research has brought media-sociology research into the digital age. Boczkowski (2010, 2005) studied how news organizations struggled with and are adapting to the transition from print to digital news, and the current study adds to this line of research. In his ethnographic study of Philadelphia’s news ecosystem during the 2000s, Anderson (2013) found that one of the biggest failings of The Philadelphia Inquirer and the Philadelphia Daily News—the city’s legacy media outlets—was that they continued to view themselves as the sole source for news and information in their communities, even as digital technology was expanding the possible marketplace of ideas.

In her study of “journalism as process,” Robinson (2011) found that people outside the newsroom are exerting influence over the decisions and workflows of those within the newsroom. Journalism as process, as Robinson defined it, is a paradigm that looks at journalism as an ongoing, two-way conversation between the media and the audience, rather than just the acts performed by reporters and editors. In this view, journalism is not a product (the story or the daily paper) but the process (the constant flow of information). However, Robinson also noted that many of the professional journalists working at traditional news organizations have actively resisted new initiatives, seeing them as extra, un-paid-for work that detracts from their ability to do what they perceive as their real job: reporting the news.

Studies have begun to examine how digital and social media are affecting sports news work. Schultz and Sheffer (2007) extensively studied how sports reporters and editors use blogs as a part of their coverage. In a later study, Schultz and Sheffer (2010) found that sports reporters use Twitter primarily as a way to enhance, rather than transform, their journalistic work.

Most sports journalism is focused on the coverage of games and of issues strictly related to a team’s results on the field (Boyle, 2006). Rowe (2007) captured the balance of sports journalism:

The sports beat occupies a difficult position in the news media. It is economically important in drawing readers (especially male) to general news publications, and so has the authority of its own popularity. Yet its practice is governed by ingrained occupational assumptions about what “works” for this readership, drawing it away from the problems, issues, and topics that permeate the social world to which sport is intimately connected. (p. 400)

Rowe (2007) also found that sports journalists tend to use star athletes, coaches, and administrators as sources in stories, and Lowes (1999) wrote that sportswriters
are reliant on access to athletes, which leads to a culture that promotes more positive than critical coverage. These findings are consistent with literature on sources from political news, where journalists are reliant on official government sources (e.g., Gans, 1979; Sigal, 1974).

In his research on a Canadian newspaper's sports department, Lowes (1999) studied how the routines and practices of the reporters shaped which sports received coverage and which did not. He found that the routines overwhelmingly favored coverage of major professional sports, leading to a distinct lack of coverage for amateur or other sports that did not fit into the milieu of big-time sports:

The routine work practices and professional ideologies that constitute sports newswork—while eminently successful in capturing the goings-on of the major-league commercial sports world with precision and admirable detail—are principally a “means not to know” about another, more expansive world: the world of noncommercial spectator sports. (p. 96)

Institutionalism

New institutional theory, which comes from the field of organizational sociology, is used in the current study, as well. Drawn from organizational sociology, new institutional theory (or institutionalism) examines the practices or groups of actions that are taken for granted within an organizational field (Zucker, 1988). Institutionalism is “the processes by which social processes, obligations, or actualities come to take on a rule-like status in social thought and action” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 431). In other words, any time phrases like that's just the way we've always done things around here or that's how we do things are used, that is an example if institutionalism at work.

Along with the study of individual organizations and organizational fields (DiMaggio, 1991), new institutional theory has been used to study professions—groups of workers doing the same jobs at different organizations. A key tenet of institutional theory is the pursuit of legitimacy that organizations or members of a profession seek within a societal framework (Weber, 1968). This quest for legitimacy, rather than cost–benefit analysis, becomes the basis for decision making in professional groups and organizations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In journalistic terms, legitimacy means that decisions are based on what makes news organizations appear to be legitimate above everything else (e.g., professional standards and what journalists consider the right way to do things will sometimes be considered rather than metrics like cost or audience needs). An example of this quest for legitimacy is the notion of normalization and how journalists have taken digital-media forms like blogs and Twitter and used them in ways consistent with traditional journalistic norms, values, and practices (Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2012; Singer, 2005). This quest for legitimacy in organizations and professions leads to isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), which is when organizations in a given field closely resemble one another. Institutionalism also examines why norms, practices, and routines become established in an organizational field or a profession (Stinchcombe, 1965) and why organizations and professions may be resistant to change (Tushman & Anderson, 1986). These are all issues facing contemporary news organizations, which makes new institutional theory an ideal lens through which to study daily
journalism. Institutionalism also helps explain why the routines, norms, and values detailed in previous research exist; why they remain the same; and why there has been a general lack of change in news production.

**Methodology**

To examine the research questions, in-depth interviews were conducted with sports journalists. The in-depth interview is a method used to gain information from participants on a specific topic (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), in-depth interviews allow researchers to understand and find meaning in the lives, experiences, and world views of a population. Rubin and Rubin (2012) wrote that in-depth interviewing allows researchers to examine a problem in its natural setting and to study not just surface-level behaviors and attitudes but also the subtle patterns of behavior—what is missing along with what is there.

Participants were sports journalists who work at daily newspapers. Both sports reporters and editors were interviewed. Participants were drawn from papers across the country ranging in daily circulation size from barely under 10,000 to more than 1 million. Sampling was a combination of theoretical, snowball, and purposive strategies. In addition to the participants gathered through my personal and professional contacts, recruitment e-mails were sent to members of Associated Press Sports Editors and American Women in Sports Media. Since this study involved human participants, approval was received from the institutional review board of the Syracuse University Office of Research Integrity and Protections before data collection.

I conducted 25 interviews with editors and reporters representing 20 different news organizations. Interviews took place between December 2013 and February 2014 and ranged from 52 to 88 minutes in length. When possible, the interviews were conducted in person. In cases where time and cost made an in-person interview impossible, the interview was conducted online using either Skype or Google+ Hangouts software. I recorded and transcribed all interviews. Participants were assured of anonymity and are not identified by name, beat, or affiliation to encourage candor. To make this manuscript more readable, all participants have been assigned pseudonyms, which is how they will be referred to in this study (see Table 1). The pseudonyms were randomly chosen and assigned using a random name generator (http://random-name-generator.info). As an incentive to take part in the interview, all participants received a $20 Starbucks gift card.

The interviews were semistructured in nature, which allowed for more flexibility and freedom to explore topics while relying on a set of predetermined questions (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). Interview transcripts were analyzed using a “grounded, a posteriori, inductive, context sensitive coding scheme” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 32). Through the use of field notes and reflexive memos throughout the interview process (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008), I culled themes after each transcription. Using line-by-line coding through NVivo software, the themes culled from each transcript were compared to see which key concepts emerged from the interviews, a process Kvale and Brinkmann (2008) call condensing meanings. Data analysis was an inductive process (Creswell, 2009; Schwandt, 2007), as the transcripts and the emergent themes continually informed each other throughout the project.
Table 1 Participant Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Current job</th>
<th>Circulation of newspaper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25 years</td>
<td>Pro hockey, baseball</td>
<td>75,000–175,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Editor, HS, pro football</td>
<td>Under 30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malcolm</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>HS, soccer, college</td>
<td>75,000–175,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>17 years</td>
<td>Columnist</td>
<td>75,000–175,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cameron</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Pro football</td>
<td>175,000+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>Editor</td>
<td>30,000–75,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julian</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>Editor</td>
<td>30,000–75,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roger</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>Baseball, college</td>
<td>30,000–75,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanley</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25 years</td>
<td>Columnist</td>
<td>175,000+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mona</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>College football</td>
<td>75,000–175,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owen</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>29 years</td>
<td>College basketball</td>
<td>75,000–175,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayla</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>College football</td>
<td>175,000+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elena</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>13 1/2 years</td>
<td>HS, local colleges</td>
<td>Under 30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>9 1/2 years</td>
<td>Editor</td>
<td>30,000–75,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>HS, pro baseball</td>
<td>30,000–75,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Sports manager</td>
<td>75,000–175,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenny</td>
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<td>10 1/2 years</td>
<td>Sports manager</td>
<td>75,000–175,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Howard</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>Editor</td>
<td>30,000–75,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morris</td>
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<td>17 years</td>
<td>Editor</td>
<td>Under 30,000</td>
</tr>
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<td>Kristin</td>
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<td>22 years</td>
<td>Editor</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Luke</td>
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<td>6 1/2 years</td>
<td>Pro basketball</td>
<td>175,000+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeremy</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>11 years</td>
<td>Editor</td>
<td>Under 30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darren</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>7 1/2 years</td>
<td>Digital editor</td>
<td>175,000+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexander</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25 years</td>
<td>Editor</td>
<td>75,000–175,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frederick</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>Editor</td>
<td>175,000+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. HS = high school.*

Results

Stories Versus Information: Changes to Reporting

One of the initial questions asked of each reporter during the interviews was how many stories he or she writes during a week. It was part icebreaker, part a way to gauge how much content reporters produced during the week.

Kayla, a college football reporter for a major metropolitan newspaper who has been a professional journalist for 6 years, had trouble answering the question. "Define story, though," she said. "Because at this point now, we write all these little blog
posts so that's kinda hard to quantify. . . . Like, what do you mean by story?" She defined a story as something that was more than 300 words long and featured primarily original writing and reporting. By contrast, she defined a blog post as a shorter piece and one where, for example, she would just link to other content on the Web.

Kayla's dilemma captures one of the biggest changes to the work sports journalists are doing in the digital- and social-media age. It is easy to think of sports journalism as being split between print and online, but the interviews suggest a different dichotomy in the work of reporters and editors. That dichotomy is between what could be called traditional sports journalism with a story-centric focus and digital and social journalism, which is more focused on sharing bits of information as they become available and on the conversation between readers and reporters. The reporters and editors describe this difference not in print-versus-online terms but rather in terms of focusing on a story versus focusing on the stream of information in digital and social media. Cameron, a pro football beat writer for a major metropolitan paper, described it like this:

The best analogy I heard is (that in) sports media today, everybody wants fast food. You feed the reader fast food all the time, but it's OK to have a juicy steak once in a while. And I try to keep that in mind; we want to have this good longer story daily too that people are going to invest time into in addition to the nuggets and the french fries and all of that.

The line between the two types of journalism is blurred, in part because reporters are doing both kinds in the same workday. Cameron said that he was writing 10–12 traditional stories per week, writing about five blog posts per day, and keeping a constant, active presence on Twitter. Mona, a young college football reporter for a regional newspaper, said that she was posting 3–7 posts per day during football and recruiting seasons. Owen said he wrote 12–15 stories in the week before his interview but that the definition of a story had changed:

Sometimes, those are bona fide stories, what we would have considered a story in 1990 and 2000, and we still consider a story today, you know, like a feature on somebody. But it would also include a video, [a] mailbox [where he answers reader questions], which are quick and easy, relatively, once I do a lot of research. It also includes game stories, but then it also includes the three things to look for in today's game, quick little things.

Whether it is a story, blog post, tweet, or video clip, the reporters interviewed are being asked to produce much more content than they were even a decade ago. Kenny, a sports manager at a midsized metro paper, recalled that, in the predigital age, game coverage of the most popular team in his city consisted of a game story, sidebar, notebook, and a column. Kenny said that in 2014, game coverage for the same beat included in-game updates, a running game story posted immediately after the final buzzer, a rapid recap, a short post on key players, statistics, an interactive report card in which fans are asked to grade the team's play, a story using advanced statistics to break down the game, shot carts, a write-through on the game story, a sidebar, a column, an updated rapid recap, notes that would have appeared in a notebook but are now their own individual posts, a postgame video featuring the reporters, and social-media updates during and after the game.
The scope of content produced varies from team to team—an NFL game will be covered much more in depth than a high school soccer match. But Kenny said that while the amount of content varies, the idea is the same and operates at scale for the so-deemed lesser sports. “We give you the result, a short game story, as soon as the game is over,” Kenny said. “That’s our work ethic. You expect to see it immediately. It scales down, absolutely. In terms of what I think readers’ expectations are, that does not change.”

It is impossible to overstate what a fundamental shift this is to the profession of sports journalism, specifically to reporters. Both during games and between games, reporters are constantly being asked to create content, filing stories not on a set daily deadline but throughout the day. Malcolm, who covers college basketball, pro soccer, and high school sports, describes it like this:

Fifteen years ago, I wrote a game, one game story, that was it. Now, I’ve gotta write, I’ve gotta tweet during the game, I’ve gotta write an instant game story, I’ve gotta follow up with that and do a game story with quotes, comments from the players, more analysis, and I’ve gotta do a video.

Tim, who is now the editor of his paper’s section, began his career as a beat reporter at the same paper less than a decade ago:

I think back to when I first started and was just covering a beat and worried about what was going to get in the paper the next day. And it sure seemed like a full-time job at the time and now, in retrospect, I can’t possibly imagine how I filled my days just worried about that.

The interviews suggest an interesting duality in sports journalism, not between print and online but between what can be called traditional journalism, which revolves around the story, and what can be called online journalism, which revolves around a stream of news, conversation with sources and readers, and evolving news. Traditional journalism can be summed up in the job description offered by Simon: “Your job is to write the frickin’ story.” Online journalism centers on reporting news and information as it happens, generating a steady stream of information for readers and fans. This is a subtle but distinct difference.

Gather, Report, Sort: A New Reporting Model?

While the topics sports journalists write about have not changed all that much, what has changed are the publishing mechanisms. Before digital and social media, the reporting process was gather-sort-report. In the digital- and social-media age, the data suggest that the model is more gather, report, sort—reporters get the information, publish it online, and then sort it later in terms of what becomes part of the story. Simon recalled a story he had just written about the goalie for the hockey team he covered. The goalie made comments about his future with the team that Simon deemed newsworthy. After making that initial decision, Simon posted two of the quotes to Twitter, doing so while walking from the locker room to the media work room. “I don’t want to give [readers] too much: I want you to go to my site at some point,” he said. After returning to his computer, he posted a short entry on his newspaper’s blog with the quotes, some background information, and the
audio files from the interview. He said it was about 30 minutes between his tweet­
ing the goalie’s quotes to the time the blog was posted. It was only then, after the blog was posted, more than 30 minutes after finishing the interview with his main source, that he began writing the story that would appear both in print and online.

Owen said that every Monday on his college basketball beat, he has standing posts to his paper’s Web site. “The AP poll comes out around noon, [I’m] gonna do the poll, and [conference] player- and rookie-of-the-week awards get announced every Monday at 2–3 and I do that. Ready-made, every Monday I am golden.” In the past, those may or may not have been full stories or smaller parts of larger stories. Now, these items are always posted online—whether they involve the team he covers or not. The reporters interviewed did not seem to take this as a license to be more creative in their reporting. Instead, they seem to be reporting the same information they always have, just in piecemeal form rather than all at once. Tim, the beat writer turned editor, said,

Probable more stuff just kind of died on the vine.... I’d come across some­thing interesting but it didn’t really fit with the story I was writing the next day, so it was interesting to me and it ended when I tossed out that notebook at the end of the day. Whereas now, even if it’s not a story, it’s a tweet or a blog post or something.

However, while the amount and the timing of a reporter’s work have dramati­cally changed, in some ways, the nature of them have not. The type of information reporters gather, the sources they use, the general story archetypes they write, do not appear to have changed. Reporters are gathering a lot of the same information they always have—who is injured, who is going to start, where teams are in what respective polls, and so on. Veteran sports journalists—reporters Owen, Simon, and Stanley; editors like Kristin and Frederick—said that much of the basic, raw materials of sports journalism (games, player news, etc.) remain the same. There are some new types of stories done—Simon recalled writing a story about a player who got into a Twitter argument with a famous actor, and Kristin talked about a story that ran on her paper’s Web site based on a fan’s YouTube video. But for the most part, the kind of information being reported is the same in the digital and social age as it was in the print age.

Technology and Video Reporting

One of the driving forces behind the new gather-report-sort model is, of course, technology. From the Internet as a publication platform to the technology reporters use, digital technologies continue to change how reporters do their jobs. Malcolm, a veteran reporter, said that journalism has always been a 24/7 job. “Now, you’re actually expected to produce, at times, 24/7. You have the vehicle to produce 24/7,” he said. He recalled a time when he reported, wrote, and filed a story from the backseat of a car on the way to an airport while on vacation with his family.

Digital media have accelerated sports journalism the same way they have news­side journalism (Weiss & Joyce, 2009). Reporters are doing more work than before, and they are being required to work faster. Digital media have made it possible for sports journalists to publish news updates around the clock and are changing the basic
model for reporting news. In the print era, that model could be described as “gather-sort-report.” Publishing a story came at the end of the cycle. The day’s work built to a story that was reported. The interviews suggest that in the digital-media age, that model is changing to “gather-report-sort.” Publication is now a part of the process, not the result of it. The presence of digital-journalism outlets like ESPN.com and Yahoo! Sports has increased this pressure exponentially, primarily (it appears) for reporters covering professional and major college sports. The competition from digital outlets is incredibly strong, and many of the reporters said they struggled to keep up with the national digital reporters. Several reporters indicated that, as a result of digital and social media, their routine in breaking news was “tweet-blog-story”—where news is first posted to their own Twitter feeds, then posted to the newspaper’s Web site (either on a blog or on the Web site itself, something that varies from newspaper to newspaper), and then a story is written that runs both in print and online. This new routine has brought sports journalism, at least in part, out of its night-shift cocoon and has integrated sports journalists into the rest of the newsroom. Their daily work, the things they are actually expected to do, is beginning to revolve more around the stream than the story. The story is something they are expected to do, but it is now only one thing they are expected to do. It is no longer the focal point of their day.

Discussion

Sports journalists have a saying they often refer to when discussing their jobs: rooting for the story. The phrase came up several times over the course of the interviews conducted for this research. It is used as a central description of the job and also often as a defense when readers accuse reporters of rooting for—or more frequently against—a given team. In many ways, it is a central, normative belief that encapsulates the sports journalists’ job. It distinguishes journalists as a professional field from sports fans. Fans live and die with their teams’ successes and failures, their wins and losses. Sports journalists do not care who wins and who loses. They have a job to do either way. They root for the best story—the account most interesting and compelling to them and to their readers.

The notion of rooting for the story can also be viewed as a sort of metaphor for the profession. The data suggest that the fundamental dichotomy in sports journalism in the digital age is the difference between the river of information found online and “the story”—what we think of as the traditionally structured, reported, and presented story that runs both in print and online. The sports journalists interviewed find themselves torn between the two, between keeping their audience informed of the latest news in a world in which news is always breaking online and providing their readers with a story that meets the traditional standards of daily journalism. The reporters and editors spend their days juggling their work between the stream and the story. The reporters and editors interviewed tended to value the story more than the stream. That is the normative value for sports journalists. That is their purpose. That is what digital and social media sometimes prevent them from doing—the story.

In a very real sense, the idea of juggling the story and a stream is a perfect way to understand institutional sports journalism in the digital age. It shows the challenges that reporters and editors face, demonstrates their long-held values and their new work routines, and illustrates what is and is not changing in sports journalism in the digital age.
Conceptually speaking, sports journalists’ day-to-day work routines are where the most change appears to be happening. Their professional norms and values appear to be relatively unchanged—at least the change is not as acute as that found with the routines. But the transformations that have been brought about by the influence of digital and social media, including the journalism-as-process paradigm, appear to be mostly seen in the sports journalists’ day-to-day work routines.

The interviews suggest that sports journalism is a social construct, a finding consistent with those in studies of news journalism (Fishman, 1980; Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1980). Sports news is not something that reporters find in gyms and stadiums. It is something that sports journalists create through their norms, practices, and routines. The play of LeBron James, a game between the Red Sox and Yankees, a decision by Robinson Cano to sign a free-agent contract with the Seattle Mariners—these are not inherently newsworthy in and of themselves. They are newsworthy because they have been made newsworthy in part by sports journalists’ routines, norms, practices, and values—meaning that sports journalism is as much a social construction as news journalism (Fishman, 1980; Gans 1979; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; Tuchman, 1980).

Conceptually speaking, the data suggest that, in general, the most dramatic changes to sports journalism are happening at the routine level. The changes are seen in how reporters structure their workday, the kinds of work they are being asked to do, and the pressures and expectations placed on them. These changes include covering multiple beats, using digital and social media to post short news updates online, being active on Twitter, and so on. Many of these changes are the result of both the emergence of digital, online journalism and the economic problems facing the newspaper industry. This is the stream—a constant flow of information, including interaction with readers, in which news is reported as it happens. This is the sports version of Robinson’s (2011) paradigm of journalism as process.

But for all the changes happening to the routines of sports journalism, there is much about a sports journalists’ job that remains the same. The interviews suggest that many core aspects of sports journalism remain very much the same as they were in the predigital age. Sports journalism revolves around covering professional, college, and popular high school sports; reporting game results and news about local teams; providing analysis of a team’s successes and failures; and giving commentary on the news of the day. It still revolves around going someplace where a reader is not and providing information that the reader did not know before. Conceptually, the data suggest that many of the norms and values of sports journalists—what is a story, what sources should be interviewed for a story, what the purpose of daily sports journalism is—either remain the same or are not changing as rapidly as routines. This is the story. That is what the data suggest that sports journalists value more than anything—a good story.

The decisions of what to cover are a product of training and experience and an example of normative isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), the notion of a shared set of norms, values, and practices that cut across individual organizations and a part of a profession. Those norms and values do not appear to be widely changing in the digital age. Story judgment and source selection are examples of institutionalism (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) and reflect the idea of tacit knowledge (Nelson & Winter, 1982). Reporters may not be able to say why they do something
(Stanley, a columnist at a major metropolitan newspaper, likened it to muscle memory), but they just know it is the way they do things.

Routines and norms and values are interconnected and possess a kind of symbiotic relationship. Routines reflect journalism norms and values, and those norms and values in turn inform the routines. Objectivity, which Soloski (1989) called the most important journalist norm, shapes the journalism routine of getting quotes from sources that represent all sides of an issue. The routine of seeking quotes from both sides, in turn, perpetuates the norm and value that is objectivity, or balance. The routine of interviewing official sources is rooted in the value of providing accurate and authoritative information. That value, in turn, leads to journalists’ wanting to interview official sources for their stories. The routines (what journalists do) reflect their norms and values (what they think they should do) and vice versa. What sports journalists are doing in their day-to-day jobs may not always reflect what they think they should do. This balance, between changing routines and generally stable norms, is the underlying tension facing sports journalism in the digital age. Sports journalists are required to juggle the story and the stream, and that idea of juggling is as important a notion as the story or the stream itself. Reporters and editors are very much doing jobs for two different media, print and digital, in the same workday. The data suggest that the norms and values are not changing at the same rate as the routines.

This evolution from story to stream marks a drastic change from the work of sports journalists that Lowes (1999), Boyle (2006), and others have found in their research and a drastic change from the work patterns described by Vecsey (1986), Walsh (2006), Wilstein (2002), and others in their popular accounts of how they do their job as sports journalists. It also marks a change in how Fishman (1980), Gans (1979), Tuchman (1980), and others described the work of newspaper journalists. The interviews paint the picture of journalists who are constantly working, constantly reporting, and publishing information. “On deadline” used to refer to the hour after the game ended and before a reporter’s story was due to the copy desk. Now, reporters are always on deadline, always filing information (Stovall, 2003). If, as an example, a player is missing a game due to injury, that used to become part of a reporter’s game story or notebook. Now, it is tweeted out immediately, and a brief story is posted online before the game even starts. This is the journalism-as-process model in action (Robinson, 2011), in which sports journalism is centered on the ongoing exchange of information throughout the day rather than the story that will appear in the next morning’s paper. The extent to which these changes affect reporters or editors appears to be influenced by the organization they work for. Sports journalists who work for news organizations that have decreased the frequency of their print publications and are more digitally focused appear to have the journalism-as-process model playing a bigger part of their job than reporters at other newspapers. Without a daily paper, or with the daily paper being de-emphasized, it makes sense that journalists at digitally focused news organizations accept the journalism-as-process model more than other journalists.

**Limitations and Future Research**

As with any research study, there are limitations to this one. Using in-depth interviews allowed me to capture the participants’ experiences in their own voices. However, the study does lack the first-person observational detail that ethnographic
research would bring. I depend on the trustworthiness and honesty of the participants to accurately describe their work practices and attitudes. I have no reason to believe that the participants were not honest in their descriptions, but there is no way to guarantee this. In addition, the anonymity that was provided to participants limited the amount that this research could quote from their daily stories, tweets, or blog posts (quoting too liberally would reveal identifying information about the reporter or editor), limiting the detail that could be provided about how the norms, values, and routines are demonstrated.

Looking forward, this study provides a basis for several areas of future research that can focus on sports journalism (that is the agenda that will be described), but it can easily be extrapolated to other areas of journalism, as well.

As a qualitative study, this provides potential theoretical linkages needed to conduct a survey of sports journalists. This survey could potentially look at, among other areas, the institutionalized aspects of sports journalism—specifically the presence of both normative and mimetic isomorphism in how the profession’s norms, values, practices, and routines are established and maintained; the place of digital media on a competence-enhancing/-destroying technology continuum; and how media routines define sports journalism. This fits with one of the established patterns of research: using a qualitative study to provide the basis for a follow-up quantitative study on the same topic. It would take the data suggested by the interviews and put the weight of statistical backing behind them.

This study focused on daily journalism and newspaper sports journalism. This research could be expanded by studying the routines, practices, norms, and values of national sports Web sites like ESPN.com or of national sports blogs like Deadspin.

References


