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Sports Journalism and the Future: An Ever-Changing Field

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ABSTRACT

The digital age has brought great change to the field of sports journalism, which is currently in a state of instability. This project identifies and examines trends in the field of sports journalism and attempts to gain insight into where those trends may lead in the future. This project explores four areas of the field in particular—new and social media, blogging and citizen journalism, local sports coverage, and long-form sports journalism. Fifteen current or retired sports journalists from different outlets and mediums were interviewed to weigh in on the field's emerging trends, the implications of these trends and how they're impacting the future of the profession.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	iii
Sports Journalism and the Future: An Ever-Changing Field.....	1
New and Social Media.....	2
Twitter.....	2
Digital Content.....	6
Burnout and the Pace of Coverage.....	11
Blogging and Citizen Journalism.....	13
A Shifting Community.....	13
Bleacher Report, Citizen Journalists and Legitimacy.....	16
Emerging Content.....	19
Local Sports Coverage.....	21
The "Demise" of Local TV Sports.....	22
Providing Unique Coverage through Hyperlocalization.....	24
Building a Digital Community.....	26
Long-form Journalism.....	28
Myths and Writing for the Internet.....	28
Funding and the Future of Magazines.....	31
Sources.....	35
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	36

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Sports Journalism and the Future: An Ever-Changing Field

“People should be going into this profession with their eyes wide open.”—Mark Brennan,
FightOnState.com

Sports journalism used to be straightforward. A journalist would go to a game, write about it and people would read about it in the paper the next day or in a magazine a few days later.

“Back when I was working for Sports Illustrated in the early '90s, we were doing one magazine a week,” said John Walters, founder of mediumhappy.com, a sports and pop culture website, and a *Sports Illustrated* staff writer for 15 years. “The game happens on Saturday, the earliest our readers were going to read about it was Thursday. And no one was bothered by that. Our readership wasn't. This was fine.”

That's hardly the case anymore.

The advent of the digital age has instituted a sweeping, top-to-bottom shift in the way the sports journalism industry works. Fan blogs have sprouted up, newspapers are cutting down on the days they print—or ceasing to print altogether—and what's left is an industry that's virtually changing on a day-to-day basis.

“It certainly has [changed a lot]. Even in a few years,” said Audrey Snyder, a Penn State football reporter for *The Patriot-News* and its digital affiliate, PennLive.com. “It's just been so much change and adapting to it.”

Major trends are emerging in all corners of the sports journalism world—from long-form journalism to blogging to local TV sports and so on and so forth. In a series of interviews, 15

established journalists from all different outlets and mediums weighed in on these trends. Their consensus: The field's evolution isn't slowing down any time soon.

New and Social Media

Twitter

“I think in a lot of ways it certainly has helped, it's another platform, it's another tool in the toolbox. But it's not the end-all that I think a lot of people think it is.” —Jerry Micco, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Of all the changes that the digital age has brought to journalism, the introduction and popularization of social media, particularly Twitter, is among the biggest. Twitter, a social networking service that allows users to post micro-blogs, called “tweets,” of 140 characters or less, is rapidly expanding. According to the Pew Research Center’s 2013 *State of the News Media* report, Twitter now has 59 million active users, over double its 29 million users in 2012, and it's changing the dynamic between journalist, athlete and fan.

John Affleck, who served as a reporter, editor and national manager at the Associated Press for 22 years and is now the Knight Chair in Sports Journalism and Society at Penn State, said that Twitter is giving athletes and fans a bigger role in the news making equation. One of the more troubling trends for journalists is the ability of athletes to go directly to fans with news and stories via Twitter.

“The newsmakers have direct access to the people, so being able to cut the journalist out of the equation is an interesting development. It frustrates the journalists a great deal,” Affleck said.

One recent example of an athlete opting to communicate directly with followers rather than through journalists is that of English football player Joey Barton. In 2012, Barton wrote an opinion piece in London's *The Times* that detailed what Barton, who faced some legal trouble throughout his career, felt was unfair treatment from journalists and the way in which Twitter allowed him to repair his reputation through direct contact with his fans. In that same vein, a 2013 study by researchers at West Virginia University found that athletes interacting with fans on Twitter circumvented journalists and had the potential to marginalize them.

“It gives [athletes] a direct conduit to talk to the fans. So it can give them an excuse to interact with the media less,” said Michael Weinreb, an author and contributing writer for SportsOnEarth.com, a general sports website that's part of a joint venture between The USA TODAY Sports Media Group and MLB Advanced Media, L.P. (MLBAM). “Because they figure they can disseminate the information their own way, the way they want to do it, using their own words and not have to go through the filter of the media. So from their perspective, I think it's a way to get around the media.”

But if athletes can deny journalists stories by going directly to fans through Twitter, the inverse is also true. Journalists can find or think up stories they might not have if not for contact with fans or athletes via social media. Snyder estimated that she follows 400 people on Twitter who are directly related to her job. Her Twitter feed lets her “pick up what people are doing” and gives her ideas for stories at times.

Royce Young, an NBA blogger for DailyThunder.com and CBSSports.com said that he checks his Twitter feed “religiously,” in part for that very reason.

“It's like instant feedback,” Young said. “You can get a pulse on what you might need to write about. It's a way for me to immediately appeal to what the conversation is currently within the fan base, to get a sense of it on Twitter.”

Twitter, and its ability to connect journalists with their fans, has also been a driving force behind the concept of branding. More and more, journalists are expected to interact with their fans via social media, forming relationships with them and developing a public image separate from their organization.

“Who you are means more than where you write for...Howard Beck is Howard Beck,” Young said.

Jerry Micco, a sports editor for the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, said the *Post-Gazette* has made a conscious effort to brand Steelers reporter Ed Bouchette as “the guy” to follow for Steelers information.

“He is a brand. We market him that way. I think Twitter is good for that,” Micco said. “We want that out there...We want to brand people, 'Hey this is a guy you need to know. You need to interact with this guy.'”

It's not just about establishing credibility though. Snyder said that a big part of branding over social media is letting fans get a peek into a writer's personality.

“If you read my stuff on Penn Live, you would never have any idea about what I like to do except for writing about Penn State,” Snyder said. “Whereas here, they can get to know me that way. I think of it this way—for the writers I enjoy following, I like to know a little bit about

their background. Where they're from, what their interests are, so you kind of feel like you know the person that you're reading.”

Walters, who uses Twitter to promote mediumhappy.com and his own brand, said, “It exposes who you are, I find. Twitter, if you're on it long enough, it's like being married, I guess. You can go on a few dates, but once you're married, every day, people see who you really are. And I think if you're on Twitter as much as I am and a lot of other writers are, your character and your personality comes out. And I think that can be a good thing or a bad thing depending on the individual.”

Young said that there can be an inherent danger in journalists trying to brand themselves as well. He said that it's sometimes easy to get carried away with trying to develop a brand and stop focusing on quality journalism.

Young said it gets to the point that he sometimes wonders if a few of the more controversial sportswriters (his example was Jason Whitlock, a football writer for ESPN) even believe the things they write.

Thanks to social media, inaccurate information and false stories are able to circulate much more quickly. In January 2012, Penn State's student-run blog *Onward State* erroneously tweeted (and later published a story) that the longtime football coach Joe Paterno had died hours before his death. In 2010, Mike Wise, a sports columnist for *The Washington Post*, falsely tweeted that Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger would return early from a league suspension. The allegedly purposeful tweet was passed on by many other reporters, none of whom verified it. Wise was later suspended from *The Post* for a month.

Snyder said that the *Patriot-News*, and likely many other organizations, now have conversations with reporters about how to best use Twitter and how not to use it. Still, Snyder said that the use of Twitter can be dangerous for organizations.

“Ultimately, it’s a little scary from an organizational standpoint. There’s no editor with you after a game when you see something and decide to tweet it. There’s nobody holding your hand on that,” she said.

Keeping that in mind, could there be a day coming when Twitter is regulated or edited by news organizations? When everyone has “social media” editors to go along with content editors?

KC Kantz, the sports director for WTAJ-TV, a central Pennsylvania station based in Altoona, said, ““The way it’s taken off, Twitter specifically, there could be a point where that would have to happen.”

But Micco said that expending the resources to comb social media just isn’t possible for most organizations.

“We’re not gaining people, we’re losing people,” he said. “Who has time to do that?”

Digital Content

“All of our game content is pretty much used up by Sunday or Monday at the latest. We are constantly spinning forward which forces you to come up with different angles.”—Audrey

Snyder, The Patriot-News

The standard, straightforward game recap has been a staple of sports journalism for years, and according to Affleck, who now teaches aspiring sportswriters, it’s not going to go away. He said that just before he left the Associated Press in August 2013, it did a readership survey of its

biggest clients—companies like Fox, ESPN and CBS Sports, and discovered that they all wanted the same thing. Breaking news and the game story.

Still, Affleck said that the game story is becoming less relevant and outdated thanks to the speed of digital coverage.

“There's an initial burst of needing the game,” he said. “That's going to happen for anywhere from zero and six hours after game time, and then it's going to start the analysis. And that's just going to speed up.”

Snyder, of *The Patriot-News*, said that she thinks the game story will “absolutely” matter less over the next few years.

“That was one of our company-wide initiatives when we went to three days a week in print,” she said. “We no longer write game stories. For football, for basketball, we don't do it. And we've toyed with different templates to try and replace the game story.”

Adam Rittenberg, ESPN.com's Big Ten football blogger, said that fans can learn the results of a game from a number of different sources, so it's more important to give them insight on something they can't access so easily.

“Whether it's a really good column, which I think still has a place in this environment, or if it's a number of good stats or just what are they saying in the postgame locker room or the press conference—those are the kinds of things people want to see because that's harder to access than the games are,” he said.

But though fans may have more access to sports than ever, Rittenberg said that many journalists are starting to lose some of the access and privilege that they once had. Both professional and college teams have begun to push content on their own team websites, to the

point that, much like is becoming the case between journalists and athletes, it's becoming a type of competition between teams and the journalists assigned to cover them.

At a 2011 *Washington Post* Business of Sports symposium, Ted Leonsis, owner of the Washington Wizards said that his team was in the same business as *The Washington Post* and that when fans needed information about the team, he wanted them to go to his site rather than *The Post* and other sites.

Rittenberg said that this new source of competition has, at times, made the job much harder for journalists. He said that one college he covers, which he requested not be named, is particularly limited in the access it gives to reporters. There have been times, he said, when the reporters covering that college have had to write stories based off what players or coaches say to the school website because those players and coaches aren't available to them.

“That's the concern for us going forward,” he said. “I don't think it will ever get to the point where ESPN.com will get shut out of every school, but I think if you're a local reporter, it has to be a little bit of a concern depending on who you're covering.”

Snyder said that the competition between teams and journalists has ramped up in recent years. She said that Penn State used to email press releases out to *The Patriot-News* at the same time that it put them on its website, GoPSUSports.com. But now, hours or sometimes even days will pass before press releases posted on the Penn State website are emailed to the paper.

The problem, mediumhappy.com's Walters said, is that since teams can now deliver news and other content directly to fans, there's almost no upside for sports information directors to give reporters unfettered access to athletes or coaches.

“Nine times out of 10 in their eyes, it's going to be negative. Their job is to protect the brand. Their job is to make Penn State look good,” he said.

Walters said that's a problem for journalists because it's hard to get good material from athletes or coaches in just a handful of minutes.

“An older writer at *Sports Illustrated* once told me, 'If you get an hour with a guy, the last five minutes are what you probably wind up using,’” Walters said. “But you can't get to those five minutes unless you get those 55 minutes beforehand where he stops thinking of you as *Sports Illustrated* and starts thinking of you as a guy he's sitting across the table from and having a conversation with. It's a matter of getting people to relax, be themselves and be honest with you, and that doesn't happen in the first five minutes of a conversation.”

The big advantage for journalists: A (hopefully) much more objective take on things.

Young said that the Oklahoma City Thunder have an official blogger for their website, and while he's usually terrific, he's far from objective.

“It's all positive PR spin. And I almost feel like it's insulting to the readership base. It's propaganda. That's really what it is,” Young, a professional basketball blogger, said. “Those websites, they're trying to brainwash their fan bases into thinking that everything is sunshine and lollipops. There's a reason that something like *The Washington Post* is as respected and has the credibility it does. It's because they've earned that. How can I really, as a sports consumer, say that I'm getting the straight take from WashingtonWizards.com about John Wall's jump shot?”

Rittenberg said that, in particular, there's a lot of control at the college level, and that though he knows some former newspaper writers that work for college websites in the Big Ten who write some fair stories, they won't often criticize the team.

“And I would hope that fans want to see a completely uncontrolled take, and that's why they would keep coming to the Big Ten blog, or the local paper or whatever, to get that person's take,” he said.

Quantcast estimates of traffic among the Big Ten's official athletic websites and those teams' coinciding SB Nation blogs call into question whether fans really do want the “uncontrolled take” Rittenberg mentions. From February 25, 2014 to March 26, 2014, Big Ten SB Nation blogs recorded over 1.2 million unique visitors. The Big Ten's official athletic sites recorded fewer unique visitors over a similar time span—932,000—but six official sites had more unique visitors than their concurrent SB Nation blogs.

In a sense, while competition between teams and journalists is ramping up, the competition between journalists is in some ways decreasing as many news organizations are beginning to de-emphasize the importance of breaking news outside of big stories. What's become more important is analyzing or commenting on what the news means.

Mark Brennan, editor and publisher of FightOnState.com, a Penn State sports and recruiting website, said that being the first Penn State outlet to break the news of when a recruit committed used to be imperative. Now though, a lot of recruits are committing via Twitter, making that race irrelevant.

“Everybody's basically getting it at the same time, and if not, they're getting it within minutes of each other. So it's gone from having to break the news to being the people who are best able to quickly sum it up, analyze it, get a hold of the kid...that sort of thing,” he said.

Walters said that it's now a “different world” and that once a story is tweeted, it's immediately re-tweeted by everyone else and that the bigger news organization will swoop in and get the meat of the story anyways.

“ESPN is famous for this. Someone will break a story, and ESPN will swoop in,” Walters said, calling ESPN “hyenas” who let everyone else break the news—and then get most of the clicks because their resources allow them to get a good story out faster.

Michael Harris, the sports editor of *The Washington Times* disagreed with that assessment. When he was out of the business for a year, he started a Washington Nationals blog for fun and broke a few stories on it.

“The readership went crazy both times,” he said. “The second time, my readership jumped so much that people started pinging me to run ads on my blog. Just because I broke the news stories. Breaking news counts, and it establishes credibility, and it's tougher to do.”

Burnout and the Pace of Coverage

“I'm only 28. But at the same time, I can picture myself at 32 or 33 and saying, 'Man, after 10 years of doing this, do I have any words to type?’”—Royce Young, CBSSports.com

Journalism has never been a traditional nine-to-five job, but thanks to the immediacy of the Internet, the pace of coverage has ramped up. To many, the threat of burning out of the profession has become more real. A 2011 study of burnout in journalists done by a researcher at the University of Kansas found that journalists are reporting moderate, but mounting, levels of exhaustion and demonstrating high levels of cynicism and moderate levels of efficacy. It also found that journalists of 34 or younger reported higher levels of burnout and expressed more desire to change careers. A similar study done in 2006 by a researcher at Ball State University found that level of efficacy were very high among journalists, suggesting that self-efficacy in journalists may be falling.

“I've been living this 24/7 since I started,” said Brennan, who runs a Penn State football and recruiting site. “Seriously. I'm not saying that facetiously. If you get into it, you better be

prepared for what you're doing and know that if something breaks, you'd better be able to cover it, or you better have someone in position to cover it.”

Micco of the *Post-Gazette* said the problem is that new technology, as well as an increase in digital outlets, has led to an increased pressure to deliver content faster.

“I can't make my guys work 24 hours a day, seven days a week. But I have to have people try and cover the clock as best I can,” he said.

Walters gave the account of a friend who covers Notre Dame football and basketball as an example of just how demanding the profession has gotten in recent years. Walters said that just before Christmas, Notre Dame was playing a basketball game against Ohio State, and that his friend was assigned to cover the game. As soon as he got back from the game, Notre Dame's leading scorer, Jerian Grant, was dismissed from the team for academic reasons, and the next day, a highly regarded freshman decided to transfer.

“And all his editor cares about is, 'Where are my stories?' So this guy is like, 'I haven't had a free day since fall football camp started in early August, and I've got two days for my wife's birthday and Christmas shopping,’” Walters said.

Affleck at Penn State said that another problem is that it's now easier to reach reporters and because of that, easier to ask much more of them.

In the past, “There really wasn't much of a way to reach you. You could carry a pager, but they were unreliable,” he said. “It was difficult and nerve-wracking to take a day off and spend time with your family. This is back then.”

Now, he said, “the level of something to bug you for, to impinge on your personal time, has gotten lower and lower.”

And unfortunately, the consensus seems to be that the only real way to combat burnout is hiring more staff, something that is financially unfeasible for many outfits.

Walters, founder of mediumhappy.com, said that news organizations have to be thinking of the bottom line when it comes to staffing and burnout.

“As long as someone wants your job—and they do—then there are no solutions,” he said. “If I left my job and somebody, or 10 people, or 100 people were going to apply for it...If you're management, why hire more people? That's not profitable, that's not business-savvy.”

Brennan said that the important thing for journalists moving forward is just to recognize that it's a business and that they'll be responsible for putting in a lot of hours. He said that anyone who's looking to enter the profession just to watch sports is making a mistake.

“Is it 24/7? Sure. But a lot of other jobs are like that,” he said.

Blogging and Citizen Journalism

A Shifting Community

“I think ultimately, people can see what's legitimate and what's not legitimate. I have enough faith in the readers.”— Adam Rittenberg, ESPN.com

The term “blogging” has become nearly synonymous with digital sports writing, and there's been an explosion in the growth of blogs over the past fifteen years. According to a 2000 review of blogging, there were just 29 blogs in existence in 1999. Today, that number is well over 100 million and counting according to Technorati.com. Technorati's most recent (2011) “State of the Blogosphere” report found that 18 percent of bloggers are “professionals” who use blogging

as a way to supplement their income or consider it their full-time job. Nearly 70 percent of those bloggers felt that blogs were just as valid a media source as traditional media, and even more felt that blogs were getting taken more seriously as sources of information.

According to a 2012 survey by a researcher from La Trobe University, most bloggers view themselves as fundamentally different from journalists. Anecdotal evidence from columns like Deadspin's Tommy Craggs' "The Basement Tapes: A Compendium Of Sportswriters' Hacky Jokes About Bloggers" suggests that for years the reverse was also true—many reputable, traditional journalists felt bloggers, even professional ones, fit the old "guy in his mother's basement" stereotype.

"It's definitely always evolving, and the scene change is going to lean toward blogging and sites. Because it's immediate and this is how we get our news now," Walters said. "If you are a journalist and you're not going to embrace blogging, or if you still think of that in a condescending tone, I think you're missing the boat."

Glenn Stout, the editor for SB Nation Longform, said that blogging and traditional journalism can work with one another and, at their best, complement each other.

"People who are involved with fan blogs are fans of a team, generally speaking. But they're also fans of the sport. And there's no disconnect by going one place to feed a fan's appetite and going another place to feed your larger appetite for news and information," Stout said. "And there's also just the aesthetics of reading a really well-crafted story. That's a pleasant experience. It's immersive in a way that reading a blog post is not."

Snyder of *The Patriot-News* said that she's recently seen far more representatives from websites in press boxes at games than when she first started as a journalist. ESPN.com's Rittenberg said that blogs have now become the best place for fans to look if they want a national

take on sports news. He said that it's still easy to get a local or regional take on sports from newspapers, but fewer and fewer of them are covering sports nationally.

“How many national writers do you read from newspapers, compared to how many national writers do you read from websites?” he asked.

However, Rittenberg also said that he thinks the stereotypes that go alongside blogging still exist to some degree. He said that the perception of bloggers is changing, but that he sometimes hears things such as “Well, they're just a bunch of bloggers, what do they know?”

Weinreb, a college football blogger for SportsOnEarth.com, said that the merging of the two communities is both a good and bad thing, and that while it's nice to have new different and new voices, he's worried that the journalistic standards that traditional organizations live by might disappear.

“There's some value in having a lot of the old journalistic standards,” Weinreb said. “So I would hope that some of those are adopted.”

Weinreb's fears are not unfounded. In a 2009 survey of more than 210 bloggers conducted by the John Curley Center for Sports Journalism at Penn State, 96 percent said that they expected mainstream journalists to practice high standards of ethical standards and responsibility, but only 79 percent set that same standard for themselves.

However, Rittenberg said that more and more bloggers are coming from traditional journalism backgrounds, and many of those who started in a less traditional way have “legitimized themselves.”

Another key difference between bloggers and more traditional journalists in the past was in their writing styles. Both the Curley Center study and a La Trobe researcher's 2012 survey found that many bloggers felt their use of opinion and commentary were two of the primary

things that set them apart from traditional journalists. And though the two communities have merged in the past few years, the writing styles of both traditional journalists and blogs still can differ, though the gap between the two seems to be shrinking.

Rittenberg said that ESPN opted to hire established journalists who had been working in newspapers for multiple years for its blogs, and that they're pushing to get “journalistic background in the blog space.”

Even so, traditional journalists will be influenced by blog-like writing because that's how to appeal to a younger audience.

Young, who blogs regularly for CBSSports.com and Daily Thunder, said blog readers are young readers. “You've got to appeal to your audience,” he said. “And I think fewer and fewer want to read more straightforward 'lead quote, intro paragraph, quote' types of stories. I think they want more opinion and analysis, I think that they like witty commentary and humor, and just kind of talking like a regular person.”

“I try to write like I'm having a conversation with somebody,” Young said. “And I think that's part of the appeal.”

Bleacher Report, Citizen Journalists and Legitimacy

“It depends on how much we care about credibility. If you're content that there's an 80 percent chance this is right, then fine.”—John Affleck, former Associated Press editor, on traditional news organizations relying on citizen journalism.

“Everyone who works for a mainstream news organization,” Walters said, “if you get a few drinks in them, they'll tell you they hate those guys.”

“Those guys,” refers to sports outlets driven primarily, or at least in part, by citizen journalists—outlets like Bleacher Report, FanSided or Rant Sports. Citizen journalists, unlike professional bloggers, are defined as non-professional (untrained and generally unpaid) journalists who collect, disseminate and analyze news on blogs, wikis and sharing websites according to Dr. Anthony Curtis of the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, and some outlets, Bleacher Report in particular, are using them to deliver content with great success. Bleacher Report was recently sold to Turner Broadcasting for \$200 million, and is advertised as the web’s third-most visited sports property.

Walters said that from a journalist's perspective, citizen-driven sites are “insidious” and “evil,” as they hurt the livelihood of paid journalists.

The low cost for news organizations and willingness of citizen journalists to do the work, though, is encouraging news organizations to incorporate this kind of journalism into their products.

“You have to do what's most cost-effective for your company,” said Snyder of *The Patriot-News*. “And if what's most cost-effective, even if it's not what's best for the reader, if that's going to keep your paper going on for a few years or however long, that's what you have to do.”

Citizen journalism isn’t seen by many journalists as equal to work by professional journalists. A 2009 study by researchers from the University of Texas at Austin, which involved interviews with newspaper editors, found that 11 of the 29 were opposed to using citizen journalists because of their lack of professional training. In that same vein, a 2013 study involving interviews with seven national and local UK sports journalists found that citizen journalists were perceived as unpredictable and unreliable.

King Kaufman, Bleacher Report's writing program manager since January of 2011, said that he agreed with some of the criticisms of Bleacher Report at the moment. Kaufman said that Bleacher Report publishes a lot of writing and that the quality of that writing "is a spectrum." He said that he thinks the company has gotten past the point where its publishing stories that they'd rather not, but he conceded that "there's a lot of stuff that we publish that's not great."

According to Kaufman, the original vision for Bleacher Report was to first build an audience through fan content, and then focus on raising the quality of the writing on the site. He said that the standards unpaid writers have to meet to write for Bleacher Report have been drastically raised over the past few years, and that, along with a wave of high-profile hires like Howard Beck and Ric Bucher, have combined to increase the quality of writing of the site.

"I would put our best stuff up against anybody's," he said.

The problem, Kaufman said, is that perception simply hasn't yet caught up to reality. For example, Bleacher Report is often viewed as a "quantity over quality" organization filled with unpaid writers. But Kaufman estimates that "less than 10 percent" of the site's traffic comes from its unpaid writers, and said that though he expects unpaid writers to be a part of the site for a long time, he also said it wouldn't shock him if they got rid of all the unpaid writers at some point.

Kaufman said that he thinks that unpaid writing can be helpful, relating it to a "farm system" for the organization, but he also said that there's a ceiling on it when it comes to doing business.

Ultimately, he said, citizen journalism is helpful, but it can only go so far for most organizations.

"There were certain advertisers who said, you know, 'We're not going to put our logo on your page because your page has so much garbage on it,'" he said.

Emerging Content

*“That's the way most people are getting their information. Plain and simple. Most people are getting it through their phones and through their tablets.”—Michael Harris, *The Washington Times**

One of the benefits of having nearly unlimited outlets to write for thanks to the Internet? The ability to publish niche stories that may not have found a home in print.

The emergence of hybrid sites that mix pop culture and sports like Bill Simmons' Grantland and Walters' mediumhappy.com have given birth to stories that might have never been published just 10 years ago.

SportsOnEarth.com's Weinreb cited a story he wrote for Grantland in March of last year, “The Kings of Q*bert” as an example of a piece that likely never would have been published a decade ago. The story centered on George Leutz, a 38-year-old dog walker who recently set the all-time Q*bert record after a nearly 85-hour session. Q*bert is a video arcade game where players jump on lighted, colored floor tiles while avoiding enemies and obstacles.

“It was kind of an in-between piece. I don't know who would have published that before Grantland came along,” Weinreb said. “I wrote a 5,000-word profile on this dead crime writer last year for them too. And it's like, 'Who would have published that before?' I have no idea.”

Walters also said that he didn't know where this blend of content would have been published in the past, and that it was the source of some frustration in his time with *Sports Illustrated*.

“I remember being at *SI* in the late 90s and getting references to pop culture things taken out of my stories,” he said. “And it would be because the 55-year-old editor didn't get the reference. I wasn't so much that my audience wouldn't get it, it was that he didn't get it. And it wasn't just happening to me, it was happening to a lot of writers.”

On the Internet, bosses and executives can literally see how many people will read this kind of content, whereas in the past it came down to whether or not editors understood it and marketing and sales staffs could sell ads for it, Walters explained.

“Back then, it was literally bringing in 15 people into a focus group room and saying, 'What articles do you like?'" he said, adding that he thinks new blends of sports and other content will increase in volume over the next few years.

“I don't think there will necessarily be much money in it for most of us. But I think people still want to write and express themselves,” he added.

It's not just content that's changing through blogs, however. Both the delivery and the way consumers access it is starting to shift drastically. Text is transforming into video, and people are watching that video on tablets and phones.

Kaufman, Bleacher Report's writing program manager, said that Bleacher Report has begun to put a conscious focus on short videos meant to be watched on phones and tablets—videos with a “rapid-fire type of analysis.”

“It's got graphics, and it's got highlights and it's got him talking for two minutes and then it's done,” Kaufman said. “So you could watch it at a red light. So that's been a big instrument in the last couple of months. Video is big and the reason video is big is because it makes money. People like short-form video, and advertisers like short-form video.”

Not only is video important because it makes money and is cheap to produce, Kaufman said that it's important because more than half of Bleacher Report traffic is on mobile platforms.

“It's a big trend in media. We have the whole world in our pockets, and it's getting better and better all the time in terms of the technology that's in our pockets. And the number of people who have access to it. Being able to serve that is a huge part of what any media organization needs to be thinking about in the future,” Kaufman said.

Harris of *The Washington Times* said that though he doesn't yet know the value of gearing content toward videos or phones and tablets, it's something that even traditional outlets need to try because that's the way most people are getting their information.

“You can have the greatest-looking website sitting there in your room looking at it on your full screen laptop or desktop, but if the readers can't see it on their phones, you're toast,” he said.

It's for that same reason, along with smaller staffs, that journalists are being called upon to do much more than just writing, including video and podcasts.

There are some folks at our station who have been in the business for 25 or 30 years,” Kantz, central Pennsylvania station WTAJ-TV's sports director, said. “And they're just now being required to go out and shoot their own stuff, maybe. Well you can imagine how that's going. They have no clue how to do that, not to mention that they don't feel that they should have to. I'm seeing firsthand that we're really at a crossroads here, where the older veteran-type people, at least in this market, are getting phased out.”

Local Sports Coverage

The “Demise” of Local TV Sports

“When it comes to sports, it's a niche market, and if you don't have a reason to be on the air, you're not going to be on the air.” Aaron Levine, Q13 Fox

The idea that local TV sports would shrink or perhaps even die out completely has been widespread in recent years.

A 2006 study done by Penn State’s Center for Sports Journalism polled 216 sports directors, anchors and reporters at stations in the country’s top 50 television markets and found that over three-quarters of them felt that their roles were decreasing and over half of them thought that sports could someday drop out of the local newscast.

Kantz said that he does think the field is probably shrinking, but that reports of the demise of local television sports have been exaggerated. According to the Pew Research Center's 2013 *State of the News Media* report, broadcast time devoted to sports, weather and traffic rose from 32 percent to 40 percent from 2005 to 2012. The biggest increase among the three in the time devoted to sports, which rose from seven percent to 12 percent.

“I'm 28 now, and I heard these same things when I broke into the business,” Kantz said. “And I'm still standing, and until I hear otherwise, I still think it's a great field.”

Kantz said that his sports department is at three people, and that he doesn't think it can be cut more because there are so many local sports to keep up with.

Matt Maisel, the head of WJAC Sports Johnstown/Altoona/State College, said that whether coverage is shrinking depends on the market size. Maisel said that his station—which, along with Kantz' central Pennsylvania WTAJ, is in the nation's 103rd-biggest TV market according to the most recent Nielsen rankings—just hired a third person to their sports staff.

Those in larger markets tend not to be so lucky. He said that until recently, WPXI Pittsburgh had a four-person staff, and that it's now been cut down to two.

Aaron Levine, the Sports Director of Q13 Fox News in Seattle, is in the nation's 13th-largest TV market. He said that in general, he agrees local sportscasts in bigger markets are shrinking.

“When I first started here seven years ago, I would say we had five minutes a night for sports in a one-hour newscast, and now we're down to three minutes and 15 seconds,” Levine said. “Whenever there's a big sports story, it's obviously going to work its way into the newscast, but on a daily basis, the content time has definitely gone down.”

Levine said that it comes down to the bottom line, and that sports will always lose time over things like news and weather, which appeal to more audience. In a 1998 study done by the Radio and Television News Directors Foundation, only 31 percent of viewers expressed a strong interest in the sports section compared to 72 percent for weather and 65 percent for local crime.

But according to Maisel, forcing sports out of the local newscast isn't such a concerning thing in bigger markets. Maisel said that many big cities have specialized, 24/7 local sports channels like “MSG” in New York City, “Root Sports” in Pittsburgh or “Comcast Sports Network” in Philadelphia. Local TV sports isn't dying off, he explained, it's just moving to a different channel.

“If people want local sports coverage in Johnstown, Altoona or State College, they're watching WJAC. Because that's the only place where they can get their news about the Johnstown Tomahawks hockey team,” Maisel said. “In the bigger markets there are other options, and that's why news directors are saying, 'Well why are we wasting our money on sports people? People aren't even watching it when they can go to the Comcasts of the world.’”

Providing Unique Coverage Through Hyperlocalization

“You used to go to the Final Four and every major newspaper would be represented by at least one, if not multiple reporters. And that's just not the case anymore.”—Mark Brennan,

FightOnState.com

The attempt to “hyperlocalize” local sports content is recent, and born from the need for local outlets to distinguish themselves from more national coverage. A 2013 study on local TV, done by researchers from the Universities of Mississippi and Southern Mississippi, found that it's becoming increasingly important to gear local sports coverage away from well-covered national sports and toward high schools and more obscure sports.

What's important, *The Patriot-News'* Snyder said, is being able to deliver unique, high-quality content, and focusing on high schools in particular is the best way to do that.

“I think the local stuff is how a lot of these, especially papers, will continue to survive, because you can't get that content anywhere else,” she said. “If you want to read about PSU playing OSU you have a ton of national outlets to go to, where you can't do that for the Little League State Tournament game or the big high school game.”

Kantz, of central Pennsylvania's WTAJ-TV, said that he gets more complaints over missing big high school football or basketball games than missing out on Penn State coverage and that if the two overlap, he'll typically send people out to the high school games.

“There's around 70 high schools in our viewing area. So I look at that like, 'Wow.' The chances of somebody seeing somebody that they're related to or that they care about are pretty good,” he said.

But Harris said that covering high school games is a problem for outlets in bigger markets like Washington. *The Washington Times* has never covered high school sports. He said that *The Washington Post* has covered high school sports, but that's not the reason it attracts readers.

“They go to *The Post* for Capitals, Nationals, Wizards, Redskins, Georgetown,” he said, explaining that the smaller outlets in the area “can give you more on these high schools than even *The Post* or we could do if we were covering them.”

ESPN has recently branched out into more local coverage, launching spin-off sites focusing on sports in Chicago, Boston, New York, Los Angeles, and Dallas, a move that has proved very successful. In 2009, ComScore statistics showed that average of unique visitors on ESPN Chicago in May, June and July (555,000) was significantly higher than the average for the sports sites of *The Chicago Tribune* (424,000) and *The Chicago Sun-Times* (256,000).

Rittenberg, a Big Ten football blogger for ESPN, said despite the success of ESPN's local sites, he doubts that it ever majorly invests in local sports. He said that the cost of investing further in local markets would be too high and that there's no upside for national organizations to get that vested in local coverage.

Maisel agreed, saying that moving into the territory of the much smaller markets wouldn't serve big national organizations any purpose. He said that there's just too much to cover, even for organizations with the resources of ESPN.

“You don't see ESPN getting into minor league sports, you don't see them covering the Altoona Curve, you don't even see them covering minor Penn State sports. I don't see ESPN ever becoming a threat in terms of high school sports coverage, especially in this area,” he said.

Building a Digital Community

“Community does two things: 1) It looks good to have a bunch of comments and an active board and 2) that's the big advantage of digital media, meaning you can't exactly comment on a newspaper article in the physical paper. It's a one-way street when you're talking print.”—Royce

Young, CBSSports.com

“My son just turned 30,” Harris said. “He's a huge sports fan, he reads everything. And I don't know that he's ever held a newspaper in his hands.”

It's become more important than ever for local outlets to have a strong digital presence—one that avoids replicating their print products on their websites.

“You can offer so much more on there. You can post videos and link to videos and create polls. There's so many more opportunities for interactivity,” she said.

Maisel, of WJAC-TV Johnstown/Altoona/State College, said that moving forward, it's important to skew coverage toward younger viewers and readers, many of whom use social media and can access the Internet on their phones. He said that because fewer people are watching the local news, an updated website is essential to delivering people content. At times, he said, WJAC will run web-exclusive content as well.

As an example, Maisel pointed to a recent story that the station ran about Penn State woman's basketball's “Senior Day.” He said that WJAC was only able to run a 45-second story on the event, but that it put the entire interview with Maggie Lucas and Dara Taylor online.

“We don't expect there to be a lot of eyes,” he said. “But you know what? It's something different, and maybe people will watch that and stay and watch some other stories that we have up on the website.”

An increased focus on digital material isn't intended for audiences have something to look at online, it also provides more opportunities to interact with the public and create a community of fans, something that's becoming just as important for local outlets as it is for national organizations.

Snyder said that reader engagement is becoming an increasingly important part of her daily duties, and that *The Patriot-News* is constantly pushing its reporters to “hop into the comment stream, do live chats and do video.”

“The readers want to have something to talk about, and it has to be a two-way street. You have to interact with them,” she said.

Brennan said that FightOnState.com, has two forums—one that's offered for everyone and a premium forum that's offered specifically for paid subscribers. He said that the premium forum in particular is what's made the site so successful and that there's generally “significantly more” traffic on the premium forum than the free forum.

He said that the premium forum offers a place for specifically Penn State fans to talk, without having to worry about opposing fans intruding on the conversations.

“When I grew up in Hazleton, Pennsylvania, there were two things in every neighborhood—a bar and a church. And everybody hung out at the local bar. And that's where they'd go to BS about local things by themselves. And we're kind of that local corner bar for Penn State football fans. Where they can come and talk about things among themselves,” he said.

It's clear that the Internet offers inherent benefits, but what's not as clear is what that means for print products like newspapers moving forward. Could there come a day when newspapers shift solely to a digital format?

The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette's Jerry Micco said that, for the foreseeable future, he thinks printed products have their place. Micco said that people “still want to be in print” and that 90 percent of the *Post-Gazette's* ad revenue still comes from their print newspaper.

“You're seeing advertising dollars go away but circulation dollars going up,” he said. “People will pay more for the paper now. They see it as a better product.”

Long-form Journalism

Myths and Writing for the Internet

I think the reading experience has to remain paramount, just as the actual storytelling has to be paramount. If it's not, it doesn't matter how good it looks. —Glenn Stout, SB Nation Longform

Long-form journalism, which *The New Yorker* editor David Remnick described to the Columbia Journalism Review's Naomi Sharp in “The future of longform” as “lengthy, relaxed, deeply-reported, literary nonfiction,” was feared to be the first casualty of the digital age. Sharp wrote in “The future of longform,” that attention spans were thought to be shrinking and that readers wanted shorter, quicker content.

Mark Armstrong, founder of Longreads.com—a website dedicated to aggregating the best long-form stories, but which publishes some of its own original content—said over email that the “attention span myth” is being debunked.

“There is, in fact, a growing, global audience of readers, and they are hungry for intelligent content. Publishers are seeing this, too: They are now devoting more resources to in-

depth storytelling, and they're seeing a traffic payoff because these stories can have an incredibly long lifespan across social channels like Twitter and Facebook.”

Stout, the editor of SB Nation Longform, said that in the last five or six years, as newspapers and magazines have declined in popularity, “more substantive stories” were being left out and there was still an appetite for those stories among readers.

Stout estimated that the very best stories on SB Nation Longform are getting around 100,000 reads and somewhere around five minutes per read in terms of total engagement, though that number is skewed by people who click right through the story.

“For every click through that's ten seconds, you have someone who stays there for 25 minutes. So that tells you the level of engagement,” he said.

Weinreb, an author and college football blogger, said that though he thinks the myth has been busted in some ways, he still worries about longer stories finding an audience because content on the internet moves so fast and “gets disposed so quickly.”

“There are a lot of stories out there that I feel like I maybe should go back and read. But then I just don't. I just forget about them or just the churn of the culture moves things along so quickly. And I don't think it's going to slow down any time soon,” he said.

Weinreb said that the way journalists structure their work is becoming even more important in terms of hooking the reader and getting them to keep reading.

“If not shorter paragraphs, shorter sections. You really want to lure people in right away...It's even more important now,” he said.

The numbers would suggest that there's no shortage of long-form material. A 2013 Reuters piece reported that in 2012, *The New York Times* produced 33 stories of 4,000 or more words originating on the front page, up from 16 in 2011, and 21 and 23 in 2010 and 2009

respectively. One of those pieces, titled “Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek,” combined reporting with a multimedia presentation that included pictures, video and graphics, winning a Pulitzer Prize.

So does the potential for more stories that feature graphics and multimedia along with in-depth storytelling, actually make the Internet a better medium for long-form than those that have been used in the past? Stout said that it's a real possibility, and that many readers are finding that long-form stories online are sometimes more thorough and in-depth because, unlike with magazines, there are no space restrictions. He said that the depth to which it's possible to go into a story on the Internet, combined with “opportunities for design that the online world presents and the ease with which you can do some of that design” is creating a new, immersive experience.

However, Stout said though the Internet provides the opportunity to create great stories, it's important not to try to do too much. He said that the reading experience has to be paramount and that doing anything that makes it difficult to deliver the words is a mistake. He said an example would be a story that he saw recently that had elements of its design block all but six lines of the text, making it “impossible to read.”

Another problem, he said, is having multimedia elements in stories that start automatically instead of being activated by the reader. He said that most people are “horrified” when multimedia activates as soon as they open a story or when they have to do more to read a story than simply scroll.

“If it's print, you like to turn the page. You don't want to have turn the page and then shake it three times. And online you have to be very, very cautious with that,” he said.

Armstrong, founder of Longreads.com, said that he views interactive or multimedia storytelling as a separate genre from general long-form storytelling because the experiences they

offer are very different. But he said that he thinks the Internet is a particularly good medium for long-form stories because it's also so portable.

“For a long time, content on the Internet was primarily about desktop computers, which mostly meant people grazing or skimming short content during work hours. That, and the difficult economics of content creation on the Internet, led to this myth that audiences had lost their attention spans or did not want to read,” Armstrong said. “The Internet is a perfect medium for reading, primarily because of accessibility. The phone is a wonderful reading device, because it's the one you have with you all the time. It creates moments for reading that previously didn't exist for many people.”

Funding and the Future of Magazines

A magazine, at this point, is almost willing to let you subscribe for nothing, just so they can say you're a subscriber.”— John Walters, mediumhappy.com

As seems to be the case with just about everything in the field of journalism today, the biggest problem with long-form is simply finding ways to pay for it.

“The challenges are not related to reader interest—there's an audience that's hungry for great storytelling. The real challenge is funding it,” Armstrong said.

Stout said that there are problems with funding, and that most outlets simply don't have the resources to send a reporter off for six to eight months and spend thousands of dollars in travel and lodging expenses. However, he also said that he didn't think any of that was necessary to produce a good story. He said that SB Nation Longform doesn't pay nearly as much money for

stories as *The New York Times* or magazines like *GQ* do, but that it's been able to produce quality content anyways.

“Since we've launched, which was September of 2012, more—on a percentage basis—more of our stories have been cited by the major aggregators than stories from any other outlet, print or online. Of any genre,” he said.

Stout said that that both tells him that they're doing something right and that funding and resources don't matter as much as “your instinct and skills as writers.” Stout said that though they're in the process of putting someone on retainer, SB Nation Longform currently gets its stories exclusively from freelancers.

“We're able to turn around a long-form story, I'm guessing, at maybe 10 percent of the cost of one of those larger acronyms,” he said, estimating that he generally pays his writers from between \$1,500 and \$2,000 for a story, though that rate fluctuates.

Stout said that, considering the cost benefits of using freelancers over staff writers, he think more outlets will start using them moving forward.

“It's not going to be like a place like *Sports Illustrated* has been for so many years, where almost everybody is a staff writer,” he said.

Of course, that's not to say staff writers don't have their benefits. Stout said that SB Nation Longform is hoping to employ a stable of staff writers at some point down the road, though he also said that he'll never “be a closed shop” to the extent that he stops accepting pitches from freelancers. Stout said that without staff writers, it's difficult to be active in getting stories—you essentially have to sit and wait for the stories to come in.

With a staff writer, he said, organizations have someone that they're vested in and someone that they can trust to plan stories around and send on traveling trips.

“You get to aim that person there, you get to put some resources in, you get to plan. So maybe you do more design work, maybe you can add a video element in or something like that. It just opens up what you can do,” he said.

Stout said that being a small, fully digital operation has made it easy for SB Nation to catch on to trends and change the way it does things accordingly. But the magazine industry hasn't been so lucky.

According to the Pew Research Center's 2013 *State of the News Media* report, the magazine industry has been in a steady decline over the past decade. The total circulation of the six publications analyzed by the Research Center (*The Atlantic, The Week, The Economist, The New Yorker, Time and Newsweek*) has dropped from 9.3 million in 2003 to roughly 7.7 million in 2013, and ad revenue has declined steeply over the same time frame. So what's likely to happen in the near future? Are magazines like *Sports Illustrated* going to be able to hold steady, or make a successful transition to digital platforms? Or will they simply go under?

Walters, mediumhappy.com blogger and *Newsweek* writer, said that he thinks that magazines will continue to print because there's an inherent credibility that goes along with having a print edition. He explained that *Newsweek* just recently came back with a print edition after not having one for 14 months, and that by printing, magazines gain an inherent credibility and connect to their generation of readers in a way that digital media cannot.

“While everyone talks about how magazines are dwindling, and they may be, I think that the existing magazines will keep printing because they understand that that's the one edge that they still have in people's minds,” he said.

Stout said that regardless of what happens, the magazine industry is in for a tough time. He compared the transition from print to digital for many magazines to “a battleship trying to turn.”

“I mean, many of them are still run by people who are totally steeped and trained in the print tradition,” he said, adding, “In a sense, they have to stop thinking, 'Oh, we're a magazine that has a website,' and it's got to be almost seamless between the two in some way, shape or form.”

Ultimately, Armstrong said, magazines will remain in print no matter how important having a digital presence is.

“I think print will be around for a long time—in some ways digital still hasn't caught up to the simplicity and ease of that user experience—and many magazine brands are so beloved that they will have many opportunities to improve and iterate on their digital products,” he said. “The challenges here are mostly technical—how to integrate legacy subscription platforms with new digital subscriptions; how to differentiate the products for different user experiences; and most importantly, how to make it as easy as possible to readers to access content on whatever device they prefer.”

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