INTERNET SPORT BLOGGERS: WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE AND WHERE DO THEY COME FROM?

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PURPOSE

This phenomenology attempts to uncover narratives on the backgrounds, professional experiences, and work-related attitudes formed among highly successful, fulltime sport bloggers.

RESEARCH IMPORTANCE

The Internet has easily surpassed newspapers among dominant media news sources in the United States and is tied with television as the preeminent news source for U.S. citizens under the age 30. However, little is known about Internet sport journalism and sport bloggers, who increasingly are becoming important cogs in sport journalism. An exploratory study providing narratives from prominent Internet sport bloggers is lacking in the literature and this research attempts to fill that void by interviewing some of the top sport bloggers in the country, all of whom are deemed highly successful in this vocation, but none of whom developed their national journalistic notoriety through another print medium (e.g., magazines, newspapers).

INTENDED AUDIENCE AND STAKEHOLDER GROUP

This article would likely be useful to most employees in sport media, professional sport, college sport, sport marketing, and sport public relations, all of whom could potentially have their organizations, athletes, or even themselves greatly affected by these new-age sport bloggers, who collectively little is known about.

ISSUES

Nearly half of all U.S. citizens (48%) use the Internet at least an hour per day, with young adults (18-29), individuals who have earned post-graduate college degrees, and the highly affluent (annually earn $75,000 or more) spending the most time online (Gallup Research, 2009). One of the most unique aspects of the Internet is blogs, which virtually allow anyone to become some type of journalist/commentator regardless of work experience, training, reporting or writing skills, objectivity, or expertise. The majority of the world’s bloggers reside in the U.S.

However, mainstream sites such Yahoo Sports and ESPN Internet dominate Internet sport traffic numbers (Nielsen Research, 2008). Many of the writers at these mainstream sport sites are former and well-known newspaper sport reporters who switched to online in recent years as the newspaper industry began downsizing. Sport blogs, however, usually differ in writing style and in content from the more traditional media articles found on mainstream
sport Internet sites. Many popular sport blogs originated on non-mainstream sites and are authored by individuals who did not develop sport journalism reputations through notoriety in the newspaper industry. Thus, they did not necessarily follow the typical career paths of newspaper, magazine, and television sport journalists. However, there have been no published research articles interviewing sport bloggers who do not work for newspaper-affiliated Web sites. Therefore, little is known about this growing and increasingly important subset of 21st Century sport journalists.

**METHODOLOGY AND POPULATION**

The qualitative inquiry known as phenomenology was used for this exploratory study, since our goal was to uncover some of the common experiences and work-related attitudes of marquee sport bloggers. A co-author of this study had phone conversations with full-time sport bloggers, sport newspaper reporters, and sport writers (not bloggers) for prominent sport Internet sites (e.g., ESPN Internet, FoxSports.com) in an attempt to determine the most suitable interviewees for this study who also represented different types of sports bloggers (i.e., not all focusing on one sport and not all working for the same outlets). A list of 12 prominent Internet sport bloggers were identified as ideal candidates and contacted, with eight agreeing to participate and be quoted on the record: (1) A.J. Daulerio, editor of Deadspin, the most popular sport blog in the world; (2) Nathaniel Friedman, who writes under the aliases of Bethlehem Shoals, is the founder of FreeDarko.com, and has been a fulltime blogger for AOL Fanhouse and the Sporting Blog, which is affiliated with SportingNews.com; (3) Brooks Melchior, founder, CEO, and editor of the sport celebrity gossip/sex site SportsByBrooks.com; (4) Alana Nguyen, who writes under the aliases Alana G and Miss Gossip, serves as director of programming at Yardbarker.com, where she oversees an operation that maintains more blogs of professional athletes than any other Internet site; (5) Aaron Schatz, founder, CEO, and editor-in-chief for Football Outsiders.com., which regularly publishes statistical-based blogs and analyses for ESPN Internet; (6) Michael David Smith, a full-time sport blogger writing for Pro Football Talk and AOL Fanhouse; (7) Dan Wetzel, the national columnist and an investigative reporter for Yahoo Sports, the most read sport Web site on the Internet; and (8) Ryan Wilson, founder of the sporting blog, HeelsSoxSteelers.com, and now a full-time sport blogger for AOL Fanhouse. All interviews were conducted via telephone, tape-recorded, fully transcribed, and later coded individually by both researchers in the search for dominant themes. A second coder was used for the examination of all articles to add reliability to the analysis.

**SUMMARY OF THE STUDY**

Five dominant themes emerged from our data analysis: (1) Lofty education pedigrees, but no direction; (2) This started out just for fun; (3) Home is where the blogger is; (4) This job is great; (5) Not sure of my title, but I sure wear lots of hats.

All eight of the prominent sport bloggers in this study earned bachelor’s degrees, with two of those from Ivy League institutions. Three have post-graduate degrees, one earned two master’s degrees, and another has a law degree. Nguyen arguably had the most impressive academic resume of the group. She graduated Summa Cum Laude with a perfect 4.0 from the University of Pennsylvania, and earned a law degree from Stanford University. Approximately four of the eight interviewees majored in journalism or communications as undergraduates, although two were not involved in sport journalism. None of the interviewees had an easy journey climbing the ranks in sport journalism, and all worked outside of both journalism and sport at some point as adults.

Five of the eight interviewees started their own blog and all except Melchior said they did so with no monetary incentives in mind. All of the interviewees cited boredom for leaving their previous vocations and pursuing sport writing. This was especially true for Wilson of AOL Fanhouse, who earned a pair of master’s degrees from the University of Arizona and Carnegie Mellon University before landing a full-time job in the White House in 2003. Wilson, however, still found time to start his own sporting blog while working for 4 years in the White House Office of Management and Budget. Wilson was the only interviewee who did no professional writing or student journalism before beginning an online sport blogging career, which eventually evolved into his full-time profession. Six of the eight interviewees work almost entirely from their homes including Daulerio and Melchior, each of whom have double-digit employees under their direction. Among the participants in this study, seven of the eight said they
watch, read, and write about sport from home, rarely attending games. Friedman said he views a minimum of one National Basketball Association game per night during the season and often up to three in day thanks to his digital recorder. Schatz also makes liberal use of his DVR, regularly doing statistical analyses on at least three National Football League games per day.

All eight interviewees expressed a high degree of satisfaction with their current jobs. While none of those interviewed said they were wealthy, all claimed to be content to quite happy with their annual salaries. Schatz said he earns more than $100,000 gross and less than $100,000 net. In discussing her annual income, Nguyen said, “I’m actually doing better than most of my classmates from (Stanford) law school.” In addition to enjoying their jobs and earning a decent salary, all interviewees said they have freedom to write on virtually whatever they choose, with three specifically citing this as the best part of their jobs without being probed on that question.

While many traditional workers would no doubt be envious of these bloggers getting to work predominately from home, many sport fans would consider Wetzel’s job a fantasy life despite his hectic travel schedule. He regularly attends and writes about the Super Bowl, key NFL playoff games, the World Series, the National Basketball Association (NBA) Finals, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) men’s basketball Final Four, the Bowl Championship Series (BCS) college football national championship, the Olympic Games, and the Masters golf tournament. For the most part, Wetzel now chooses which events he covers and topics for his sports columns at Yahoo after not being able to land an entry-level newspaper sport position earlier in his career even after he continuously was the first to report major sport news.

Part of the reason that all of those interviewed for this research project are successful is their collective versatility. That versatility is why none of the eight interviewees wanted to be stigmatized with just one title. Wetzel considers himself a columnist, investigative reporter, and author. Wilson prefers blogger but also calls himself a writer. Friedman prefers blogger, author, and writer. Schatz dubs himself a statistical analyst, columnist, and CEO, but says he does everything with the exception of HTML coding or film breakdown for his Web site. Smith embraces both blogger and reporter, saying the line between the two is indistinguishable for quality Internet journalists.

**ANALYSIS AND IMPLICATIONS**

Results mirrored several of the findings in the John Curley Center for Sports Journalism (JCCSJ, 2009) report, as well as general academic research on bloggers. The participants in this study were well-educated, relatively young, and six of the eight reside in major U.S. cities: Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, and Seattle. Moreover, like the majority of respondents in the JCCSJ (2009) survey, all interviewees in this study believed they play an essential role in the general field of sport journalism. However, a higher percentage of these prominent online bloggers had previous professional sport media experience before blogging and/or majored in college in a related field (e.g., communications, journalism) than the respondents in the JCCSJ (2009) report. Moreover, the JCCSJ (2009) report did not differentiate between prominent and mostly unknown bloggers, or those working full-time, part-time, or blogging for free. Thus, the experiences of these interviewees indicate that prominent, full-time sport bloggers may be more likely to have some type of journalism background before blogging than the majority of sport bloggers, most of whom do not blog fulltime.

All of the interviewees said they were at least somewhat displeased with their jobs before their current sport blogging careers. Wetzel dealt blackjack at a casino in Michigan, while doing any kind of freelance sport writing he could find. Daulerio waited tables in 1999 at the Homestead Inn in Horsham, Pennsylvania, while also earning “token” money from covering sports for weekly newspapers. Friedman earned a master’s degree in American Studies from the University of Texas at Austin but stopped pursuing a Ph.D. from the same institution to focus on participating in fantasy basketball and blogging about his favorite sport.

While there is no available data on the salaries of Internet sport bloggers or even Internet sport journalists for mainstream sites, all eight interviewees said they were pleased with their annual income. This contrasted with research on traditional sport media members, a majority of whom were not satisfied with their earnings. Moreover, all eight participants expressed a high-degree of satisfaction with their current jobs, which again differed from research on more traditional print sport writers. There were significant disagreements amongst this group on the appropriate titles (e.g., analyst, blogger, columnist, reporter, etc.) for new-age online sport journalists. However, all
noted they performed multiple duties beyond just blogging/writing in their jobs. Overall, there were considerably more similarities than differences amongst the interviewees related to their experiences with the recent phenomenon of Internet sport blogging or online sport journalism.

Results from this exploratory study should not be generalized to the sport blogosphere. Only 8 sport bloggers were interviewed and all reside in the U.S. Moreover, all are prominent and full-time bloggers/Internet sport journalists. In contrast, the majority of sport bloggers on the Internet do so for free or as part-time employment (JCCSj, 2009). However, this exploratory study provides insight to the background and experiences of these new-age journalists, whose voices are increasingly becoming more powerful in the sport media spectrum with the increasing popularity of Web sites like Deadspin and AOL Fanhouse.