



Sports Media Education's Evolution: Integrating Technology, Branding and Strategic Media

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Abstract

This mixed-method survey examines the integration of technology, branding and strategic media into sports communication education by asking faculty members who teach sport-related courses at ACEJMC-accredited institutions to reflect on their sports communication courses. Findings show the need for evolution in sports journalism curricula remains evident. The instruction of branding skills and social media are germane to the skillset students need to enter the industry. Though programs seem to be broadly embracing live tweeting of games and events, more instruction using other social networks and digital media tools should be considered. Providing students a better understanding of branding principles, beyond just self-branding, is also advised.

Media have consistently helped the sports industry evolve and grow; as Bryant and Holt (2006) argued, the sport-media relationship is special because sports need media to grow and vice-versa. As people increasingly rely on digital media and streaming platforms, traditional media's shrinking budgets paired with social media allowing sport actors (federations, leagues, teams, athletes, etc.) to directly communicate with their fans have deeply affected the world of sports journalism. This landscape shift, which is happening as the sports media industry continues to grow, has two significant consequences for journalism and communication education: (1) sports-focused programs in

journalism and communications colleges, schools, and departments (hereafter "JC schools") are multiplying (Clark, 2015; Hull et al., 2019; Wordsman, 2014), and (2) internships and jobs are no longer limited to the traditional writing and broadcasting journalistic positions, such as beat reporter or play-by-play commentator (Hutchins & Boyle, 2017). Instead, many positions now require job seekers to understand some basics of technology, branding and strategic media in addition to or in lieu of the traditional tenets of journalism — truth and accuracy, independence, fairness and impartiality, humanity and accountability (Ethical Journalism Network, n.d.).

Keywords: Sports Communication, Strategic Communication, Branding, Social Media

Today, the sports market is worth more than half a billion globally (“Why the Sports Industry is Booming”, n.d.) and growing faster than most countries’ GDP (Au, 2017). Evidence includes the Japanese soccer league, which signed the country’s largest media rights deal only a few years ago (Nelson, 2016). In the same period, the CEC Capital group estimated a 20% annual growth over the next decade for the sports industry in China (Daxue Conseil, 2017). Meanwhile, the North American market, which has been booming for years, is still expected to grow from 2019’s U.S. \$73 billion to U.S. \$83 billion in 2023 (PwC Sports Outlook, 2019). Admittedly, the 2020 coronavirus crisis might cause this projection to be revised downward, but these numbers still show the important place sport holds in the economy, and by extension society.

Considering the aforementioned special relationship between sport and media, the impact digital and social media have had, are having and will have on sports journalism has been written about extensively (e.g., Au, 2017; Boyle, 2017; Cochenec, 2015; Laharie, 2017; PwC Sports Outlook, 2019), but little research has investigated how the sports journalism education field is reacting to this evolution. This mixed-method survey is taking a first step to fill the gap by examining the integration of technology, branding and strategic media into sports communication education by asking faculty members who teach sport-related courses at ACEJMC-accredited institutions to reflect on their sports communication courses. This research seeks to inform the state of pedagogy in sports communication programs.

Literature Review

The Changing Sports media Landscape: Sport is “one of the few beats that can be called a media growth industry” today (Clark, 2015), placing itself as the most reliable content to guarantee an audience to traditional media outlets, despite declining television ratings, which are explained, at least in part, by society’s shift to online streaming platforms where audience sizes cannot yet be effectively measured (Goff, 2019). Parallely, the shift to digital media has created new environments for sports actors to communicate with fans directly, without any gatekeepers, thus creating a new competition market for traditional sports media. This shift has forced sports journalism to evolve (Boyle, 2017; Cochenec, 2015) at a moment when the budgets of legacy media outlets decrease and the cost of

media rights increase.

As a result, the outlets that do not own the rights to sporting events send fewer sports reporters than ever to these events, instead relying on technology to offer marginal coverage, e.g. by monitoring athletes’ social media account or having writers watch a game on TV to create live commentary (Cochenec, 2015). Additionally, newsrooms have shrunk by about a quarter throughout the U.S. in the past dozen years,—and about half in the newspapers industry specifically (Grieco, 2020), but the rising purchasing power of sports organizations have encouraged teams, leagues and federations to hire media professionals to create exclusive content to share with sports fans around the world (Laharie, 2017) in jobs that are essentially a mix of public relations and journalism (Hutchins & Boyle, 2017).

Scholars started studying how powerful these social media tools are for sports communication professionals about a dozen years ago. One of the first studies was a case study of how the 2009 Cincinnati Flying Pig Marathon used multimedia postings online (including Twitter, YouTube, blogs, and Facebook) to generate buzz (Schoenstedt & Reau, 2010). Scholarly literature proliferated from there. Many studies focused on Twitter (e.g., Coche, 2014; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Sanderson, 2012) because the micro-blogging platform quickly “acquired a particular status in the sports world” (Coche, 2017, p. 92) after former basketball player Shaquille O’Neal made it “the largest sports bar in the world” (Rodriguez, 2011, para. 2). The research has since evolved to include more social networks, from Facebook (e.g., Pronschinske et al, 2012; Schubert & Seyffert) to Instagram (e.g., Kim & Hull, 2017; Li et al, 2020) to Tumblr (Kunert, 2021) to Tik Tok (e.g., Su et al, 2020).

Overall, sport and communication scholars recognize social media platforms fulfill audiences’ needs now that one’s sports experience no longer centers on the television. Today’s sports fans usually engage in media meshing, i.e. a multi-screen experience before, during and/or after their favorite teams and athletes compete (Coche & Haught, 2018; Hutton & Fosdick, 2011; Kunert, 2021). Although this shift has been well documented by scholars and in the professional industry, no evidence exists to show whether higher education programs in sports media and sports journalism are following the trend. It is, however, an important to explore as students can “overestimate their

social media expertise” and thus “classroom training and experience can provide students with much needed exposure to the use of social media in a professional setting” (Byrd & Denney, 2018, p. 52).

Sports media education: As early as 1978, Parkhouse and Bassett called for the development of sports programs a “new opportunity for J-education.” They argued, “recent research completed by Parkhouse has shown that preparation offered by sport management graduate programs did not always fill student needs for sport-related occupations,” and concluded with two recommendations for journalism colleges, schools or departments. First, they wrote, there should be an evaluation of the curriculum “to determine its relevancy for various sport management occupations.” This would allow the creation of new courses “to meet the journalism-related job requirements of each of these occupations” (p. 22). Second, they wrote, journalism colleges, schools or departments should consider creating a specialization targeted toward students wishing to become a university’s sport information director. Despite this early call published in *Journalism Educator*, a journal read mostly by JC educators, JC schools were unenthusiastic toward introducing sports-focused courses to their curriculum for a long time (Hull et al., 2019).

This may in part be explained by the “negative stigma” of the discipline (p. 408). As Boyle (2017) argued, “Sports journalism has been characterised as a form of ‘soft’ journalistic practice, without the rigour and credibility of other forms of ‘hard’ journalism” (p. 493). Sport has indeed often been labeled the “toy department” of a newsroom (Hull et al., 2019; Whiteside et al., 2012), and the stereotype “likely carried over into academia since the majority of faculty in such colleges and schools worked in the media industry (Hull et al., 2019, p. 408). But sports-focused programs have proliferated in JC schools since the turn of the century (Clark, 2015; Hull et al., 2019; Wordsman, 2014). One explanation is that universities, including JC schools, have had to “find ways to attract, recruit, and retain more students” (Hull et al., 2019, p. 409) as government funding of education has decreased “well below historic levels” (Mitchell, 2018, para. 1). JC schools have done so, in part, through the creation of new programs like those that focus on sports. In fact, sports programs are “one of the most popular specializations in the field of journalism” (Carpenter et al, 2016, p. 18), so much so that an eight-item scale developed to measure students’ mo-

tivations to get a journalism degree included a “sports media” item (p. 18).

Another way JC schools have tried to attract and retain students is by accentuating storytelling more than any other elements. As Marron (2014, p. 347) explained in an editor’s note,

An emphasis on storytelling however, means employment opportunities will abound for all our students—particularly for journalists whose writing skills and abilities to tell stories make them the top picks for content creation, regardless of what the job title is.

This shift toward storytelling, Marron continued, must mean “both curricular and cultural” change in JC schools, which “are mired in a 1980s model of journalism education” (p. 348). Journalists and content creators must now know some tenets of technology, branding and strategic communication (Alejandro, 2010), as evidenced by the rise of entrepreneurial journalism education (Caplan et al., 2020) and the inclusion of personal branding advice in practical journalism textbooks (e.g., Adornato, 2018), which are “especially relevant ... with high potential for use” (Wallace, 2018, p. 486). As Hutchins and Boyle (2017) explained:

journalists’ public visibility, including their follower numbers, possession of ‘verified’ accounts, and widespread awareness of the news organisations and brands attached to their profiles ... assist[s] when journalists contact sporting figures via social media, allowing them to develop relationships at a distance and receive responses to at least some of their inquiries. (p. 506)

Therefore, this study’s authors seek to answer the following two exploratory research questions:

RQ1: What digital skills are most popular in sports journalism courses according to faculty members?

RQ2: How do instructors teach branding and digital media in sports journalism courses?

Method

Using a survey with quantitative and qualitative questions, this exploratory study sought the reflections of full-time faculty members who teach sport-related courses at ACEJMC-accredited institutions. The ACEJMC website was used to compile a list of contacts at each of the ACEJMC-accredited programs. First, full-time faculty members who teach or research about sports classes as indicated on their university

faculty profile were identified. From there, the researchers faced three possibilities: (1) one faculty member was clearly labeled as responsible for the JC school's sports media offerings, in which case that person was selected, (2) several profiles listed sports as an area of interest, in which case the researchers selected the faculty member who seemed to have a bigger emphasis on teaching skills-heavy courses, and (3) no sports emphasis was found on the website or faculty profiles, in which case the chair of journalism was selected. Once the list was compiled, the researchers emailed the representative of each program to ask that one full-time faculty member takes the online survey.

In all, 113 emails were sent to faculty members, most of whom are in the U.S. because that is where the bulk of the ACEJMC-accredited programs are located. After questions about whether their ACEJMC program offered a sports-focused class, concentration, sequence, emphasis, or major, the survey asked faculty what sports journalism courses they have taught. Then, they were asked to rate eight statements about course content on a 7-point Likert scale, from "1, strongly disagree" to "7, strongly agree": (1) I emphasize data literacy in my sports journalism classes; (2) I ask students to write social media posts to promote the stories they produce in my sports journalism classes; (3) I explain how to use social media effectively in my sports journalism classes; (4) I teach branding principles in my sports journalism classes; (5) I require visual components (photos, videos, etc.) in at least some my course's assignments; (6) I require infographics in at least some my course's assignments; (7) I require audio components (sound clips, podcasts, etc.) in at least some my course's assignments; and (8) I encourage my sports journalism students to start promoting their work online. Finally, to answer RQ2, the participants answered two open-ended questions about methods and exercises they have used in their sports courses. The first question focused on pedagogical tools used to help students understand how to build a brand, and the second question centered on the methods meant to teach students how to use social media effectively.

Nearly half of the instructors completed the survey (47.8%, $n = 54$). Of those, 12 (22.2%) indicated their program did not offer any sports journalism class, concentration, sequence, emphasis, or major. The responses of the other 42 thus serve as the primary data for the present study. Responses represented a range of programmatic offerings. Most common were programs with 2-3 courses but no concentration, emphasis, or major (20.4%, $n = 11$). Second were pro-

grams with an emphasis or concentration (14.8%, $n = 8$). Schools with a single course (11.1%, $n = 6$), an emphasis part of a larger, broader major (7.4%, $n = 4$), and as a full major (3.7%, $n = 2$), followed.

Results

RQ1 asked what digital skills are most popular in sports journalism courses according to faculty members. The researchers asked instructors their agreement with eight statements about the use of digital and social media tools in class; agreement was measured on a 7-point scale with 7 meaning strongly agree. The highest-rated statement was "I require visual components (photos, videos, etc.) in at least some my course's assignments" ($M = 5.84$, $SD = 1.74$). Following were "I encourage my sports journalism students to start promoting their work online" ($M = 5.53$, $SD = 1.96$); "I explain how to use social media effectively in my sports journalism classes" ($M = 5.50$, $SD = 1.44$); and "I require audio components (sound clips, podcasts, etc.) in at least some my course's assignments" ($M = 5.34$, $SD = 1.77$); and "I teach branding principles in my sports journalism classes" ($M = 5.09$, $SD = 1.69$). The last three statements were less popular with means lower than 5 on the 7-point scale (Table 1). An ANOVA test found no significant difference in the use of tools based on the type of program offered at the school. Thus, to answer RQ1, the most popular components are requiring a visual component and using social media.

RQ2 asked how instructors teach branding and digital media in sports journalism courses. This question can be answered through analysis of the open-ended questions about the methods and exercises participants use to (1) help students understand how to build a brand and (2) teach students how to use social media effectively. Seven instructors (17%) explicitly stated their programs do not address branding at all, but branding still seemed to be taught extensively at about a quarter of the 42 studied schools ($n = 10$). However, only a couple of them mentioned teaching concepts linked to building a non-personal brand. The majority focused instead on requiring students to develop a social media presence for themselves as a sports journalist. As an instructor at a program with a sequence or concentration explained:

In our sports capstone course, we dedicate at least 1/3 of the class to working on their own personal brand, using social media (LinkedIn, Twitter, and an online portfolio) to make sure

there is consistency. Additionally, most weeks the students are assigned a personal branding assignment (9 in total). These are mostly reflective assignments with the goal in getting them to understanding their passions, recognizing who is currently in their network and how to grow it, visualizing their online brand, creating an elevator pitch and how to make an impact in their chosen discipline.

The use of social media to report and self-promote stories was the most common, but implicit was the idea of a content portfolio with social media as its centerpiece. “We do a ‘personal business plan’ that outlines their goals and foci of their personal brand and beat,” wrote an instructor at a program with a single class. “We also talk about how the audience will find and use the end product and reverse engineer ways that the reporter can use the opportunity to build a brand for themselves around that.”

The second most used technique to teach branding to students was using guest speakers and case studies. “We select speakers who share expertise such as a CNN Sports rep to show the students what they do on a daily basis with content and how they share it with other media platforms in the CNN family,” wrote an instructor in a program with a sequence or concentration. These programs used outside expertise to teach students in addition to, or in place of, class instruction.

Finally, five instructors tied branding to reporting functions, such as reporters identifying themselves

in broadcast stand-ups or play-by-play announcing. “These students are required to produce packages, VO/SOTs and VOs, as well as audio reports for sporting events in the campus community,” wrote an instructor at a program with two to three courses but no concentration or major. “They also are required to complete multiple play-by-play and color commentary assignments for actual sporting events. They repeatedly identify themselves, their production, and their station including branded game moments such as radio and TV timeouts.”

The second open-ended question asked participants to identify how they used their sports media courses to teach effective social media usage. Thirteen instructors explicitly mentioned using live tweeting as an assignment for classes. An instructor at a program with two to three courses but no concentration or major wrote:

First, we practice live tweeting a lot during class. Several times throughout the semester we practiced using prerecorded events or live events that may have occurred during class time. After each practice, posts were critiqued in front of the class. Students were also required to create four social media stories throughout the semester. They used Facebook and Instagram Live as well as the Instagram story function to produce short video and/or photo features.

Another instructor at a program with a single class indicated being resistant to live tweeting, how-

Table 1

Means and standard deviations for each of the eight statements about course content (N = 42)

	M	SD
I require visual components (photos, videos, etc.) in at least some of my course’s assignments.	5.84	1.74
I encourage my sports journalism students to start promoting their work online.	5.53	1.96
I explain how to use social media effectively in my sports journalism classes.	5.50	1.44
I require audio components (sound clips, podcasts, etc.) in at least some of my course’s assignments.	5.34	1.77
I teach branding principles in my sports journalism classes.	5.09	1.69
I emphasize data literacy in my sports journalism classes.	4.97	1.73
I require infographics in at least some my course’s assignments.	4.72	1.89
I ask students to write social media posts to promote the stories they produce in my sports journalism classes.	4.72	2.13

Note. An ANOVA test found no significant difference in the use of tools based on type of program offered at the school.

ever, because their students were still learning the basics. Instead, they revealed they took class attendance through Twitter “to get them [students] in the habit of using Twitter.” To do so, students must tweet about class after every session, either by noting “the most important things they learned or something they didn’t understand.” Outside of class though, this instructor merely “suggest[s]” their students “tweet as they’re watching events” but does not require it. Other instructors also noted a case study and guest speaker approach, similar to the teaching of branding. Ultimately, social media learning often comes through live tweeting assignments and observations of professional work on Twitter and other platforms.

Discussion

The need for evolution in journalism curriculum remains evident as the industry itself evolves with the technology, public need, and the market. Sports journalism is no exception (Boyle, 2017; Hull et al, 2019), and instructors and programs need to adapt coursework to meet the skills students need when they enter the industry. The current research sought to examine the effect digital and social media have had, are having and will have on sports journalism education. In sum, the mixed-method survey results indicate that programs are broadly embracing social media mostly through the live tweeting of games and events, and that a smaller number of programs are embracing branding, but primarily through the lens of the students’ online presence.

Instructors indicated they often require visual and audio components in their courses and regularly explain to students how to use social media. They also teach some branding principles in their sports journalism courses and encourage students to start their self-branding online, but they do not necessarily require it or even provide students any hands-on training regarding the promotion of sports stories on social media. Furthermore, the analysis of the open-ended questions revealed that social media were used most frequently through the live tweeting of sporting events. One instructor’s insight, that students were too green to balance live tweeting alongside reporting, is telling. It is reminiscent of Byrd and Denney’s (2018) experience when they gave their students an Instagram exercise, and the students “reported having to step outside of their comfort zones to produce their Instagram stories” (p. 52) because they had never used Instagram for professional purposes before. A long-

standing quandary for many journalism instructors is finding the balance between making students do a lot of work and making the students do high-quality work. Of course, in newsrooms, reporters are generally expected to do a lot of high-quality work, but, arriving at that level happens through multiple paths of growth. Students, by their very nature, are inexperienced, and the ways they grow in experience could shape who they become as a journalist. Live tweeting is a great skill students will need when reporting on games, and it teaches them to act quickly. However, this assignment might be best used when students aren’t actually covering the games themselves.

Further, the prevalence of live tweeting in the participants’ open-ended answers forces the researchers to consider the question: is live tweeting enough? Indeed, the question asked in the survey left all options open. It read: “What methods and exercises do you use in your sports journalism course(s) to teach students how to use social media effectively?” That live tweeting was the most cited exercise is not surprising considering the special relationship between sports and Twitter specifically (Coche, 2017). However, that almost no other networks were mentioned seems shortsighted. Although live tweeting is important and does have its place, it alone as the thrust of multimedia education is insufficient and has been grounded in the professional routines almost a decade ago (Price et al., 2012), rather than being on the cutting edge. Teaching tools could (and should) include blogging, podcasting, livestreaming vlogs, and even other platforms like Instagram, Tumblr and/or TikTok. Few survey participants even mentioned any of these tools.¹ Responses to this survey hence suggest cutting-edge platforms and techniques may not be used sufficiently in classrooms across ACEJMC programs, though future research should determine exactly how faculty incorporate such platforms and techniques for a more accurate assessment.

In addition to digital media, RQ2 asked how instructors teach branding in sports journalism courses. Again, the open-ended question asked was general. It read: “What methods and exercises do you use in your sports journalism course(s) to help students un-

1. No survey participant mentioned Tik Tok in their responses, but, in the United States, the Chinese platform became popular mostly starting in March 2020 when COVID-19-related lockdowns started in the country, and the survey was conducted a few months prior to that, in 2019.

derstand how to build a brand?” Almost a quarter of respondents (n = 10) indicated they fully included branding principles within their courses, yet textual analysis of their answers revealed they seemed to understand the term branding exclusively as “self-branding.” Though both concepts are similar at their core, understanding a brand that is not one’s own is a different exercise from self-branding. It requires additional in-depth research about the company, athlete, team, league, federation, etc. one is charged to promote.

However, faculty may equate “branding” to “self-branding” in this context in order to not conflate journalism with PR, despite the increasing number of jobs mixing both in sports media (Hutchins & Boyle, 2017) and in other industries through brand journalism, which blurs the line between journalism and strategic communication (Serazio, 2021). The practice, which has flourished “in the past decade” (p. 1341), brings in billions to corporations as they “employ journalistic means” to produce content for their customers (p. 1341). From a pedagogical perspective, the question then becomes: is brand journalism considered and/or taught in ACEJMC-accredited journalism programs, and should it? This question of course raises ethical concerns as many journalists have long prided themselves on being guided by values that include autonomy and objectivity, both of which conflict directly with the concept of brand journalism (Serazio, 2021). The instruction in personal branding and portfolios students receive is vital, but perhaps we, as sports journalism or sports media educators, should ask ourselves if it is enough. Even if our students work in traditional journalistic roles, today’s sports media industry is imbued with branding (Darlow, 2014), so a strong understanding of branding concepts could be beneficial for sports journalism students to provide more accurate reports on the players, teams, leagues and overall industry they cover.

In 2018, Ercan conducted a study about journalism education in Turkey. His main takeaway was “journalism education today is not compatible with the opportunities and potentials offered by new communication technologies” (p. 365). The results of the current study, which surveyed faculty at ACEJMC-accredited programs about their sports journalism courses, concentrations, minors or majors, tends to point toward the same conclusion. Yet, learning digital media tools and navigating the ever-so-blurry line between journalism and strategic communication must be balanced with writing skills, as many

instructors noted. To echo Roberts (2018), “as news media navigate a time of unparalleled disruption, training the next generation of journalists has never been more of a challenge.” This task faces sports journalism alongside every other sub-discipline in journalism and communications, and is worthy of its own extensive research. The 2020 removal of ACEJMC’s cap on credit hours in journalism and mass communication programs could make this balance a bit easier to achieve.

Limitations

The present study is limited in several ways. First, the nature of the limited number of ACEJMC-accredited programs, and those offering sports journalism, limits the power of statistical tests. Also, because the great majority of ACEJMC-accredited programs is in the United States, participants were heavily teaching in that country, which is likely not the one where the line between journalism and PR is the firmest, particularly pedagogically as US-based journalism schools or departments also often offer programs in strategic communication, such as PR and/or advertising. Finally, the technological evolution in teaching forced by COVID-19 might have changed several of these teaching practices. Future scholars should further research student attitudes toward branding and social media in classes. Examining what jobs these students get as interns and as graduates also could illuminate what skills they need to learn in college. Scholars also could compare sports journalism to other journalism subfields, like food, travel, or business, that also have heavy social media and branding implications.

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