

THE USE OF TWITTER AS A NEWS SOURCE IN SPORTS REPORTING

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A Thesis presented to the Faculty of the  
Graduate School University of Missouri

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree Master of Arts

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DECEMBER 2014

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Any shortcomings in the design of or conclusions drawn from this research project are by no means a reflection on the outstanding guidance and support I have received from my Thesis Committee Chair, Professor Timothy Vos, and the rest of the Committee, namely Professor Melissa Click, Professor Jacqui Banaszynski, and Professor Greg Bowers. A debt of immense gratitude is also owed to program advisor Sarah Smith-Frigerio, for her guidance and for keeping me on track. Finally, I would also like to thank my wife, Eileen Shulock, for her patience and support throughout this amazing journey.

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## ABSTRACT

Professional athletes are actively using Twitter to communicate directly with each other and their fans. Relatively little media and/or mass communications research has explored the effect this direct communication channel has had on the role of journalists who cover these athletes and have served in a gatekeeping role, deciding what news and information is worthy of coverage. The present study sought to assess how reporters covering the four major U.S. sports—baseball, basketball, football, and hockey—are using athletes' Twitter feeds in their coverage and what impact athletes' presence on Twitter has had on their role as gatekeepers. A search of sports beat coverage in eight daily newspapers during a one-month period yielded a total of 74 articles in which an athletes' Twitter feed was used as a source. A textual analysis of these articles revealed that athletes' tweets are used in place of quotes when an interview is not possible, as a source of breaking news about the athlete and/or his team, as the genesis of a story, and to gauge public sentiment toward an athlete. Interviews with 20 of the sports reporters covering the four major sports at the eight newspapers and five of the editors at these outlets confirmed these uses. Respondents also acknowledged that Twitter has enabled athletes to communicate directly with their fans without involving the traditional sports media. However, most the respondents also noted that the limitations of the medium kept their roles as reporters relevant to the fan/reader.

## Chapter I

### Introduction

J.R. Smith is a well-known—and successful—professional basketball player in the National Basketball Association (NBA). In November 2013, Smith made national headlines when, as a member of the New York Knicks, he appeared to threaten a rival NBA player, Brandon Jennings, via a tweet sent to his 400,000-plus followers on Twitter (Mahoney, 2013).

The incident did not mark the first time—or the last—the mercurial player made news on his Twitter feed (*New York Daily News* Staff, 2014) and, from a journalistic perspective, this raises a number of questions. For example: Is what an athlete tweets newsworthy? And, are journalists who report on what athletes tweet merely re-reporting what is essentially old news?

Founded in 2006, Twitter is a social networking and microblogging service that allows users to send and receive short, text-based posts (of 140 characters or less), known as “tweets.” It has been well documented that athletes, like all celebrities, have embraced social media, including Twitter (Gregory, 2009; Sanderson, 2013). Twitter has been described as a “broadcast” medium that can be used by newsmakers—including professional athletes—to break news about their own professional and personal lives (Ahmad, 2010).

Indeed, athletes have proved to be some of the most popular personalities on the platform; for example, NBA star LeBron James has nearly 14.5 million followers (Twitter, 2014). However, while a great deal of mass communications research has focused on how athletes are using Twitter to communicate directly with each other and their fans (Hambrick

et al, 2010; Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Sanderson, 2013), little is known about the effect this direct communication has had on the role of the journalists—namely, sports reporters—who cover them.

For decades, sports reporters have served a gatekeeping role, deciding which aspects of sporting events, including the thoughts and reactions of the athletes who participate in them, are worthy of coverage (Lau & Russell, 1980). However, Twitter offers athletes the opportunity to bypass the traditional gates, potentially resulting in a change in the dynamic between sports reporters and the athletes they cover. Indeed, an attraction of Twitter for athletes who use it is that their tweets enable them to communicate directly with fans, rather than having their messages filtered through publicists and/or the mainstream media (Hambrick et al, 2010; Gregory, 2009), and some reporters have noted that athletes have become far more difficult to reach for one-on-one interviews since the advent of social media (Hutchins, 2011).

This study was designed to assess how newspaper sports reporters are using the Twitter feeds for the athletes they cover as a source and to learn what impact, if any, the expanding social media presence of athletes has on their roles as gatekeepers on the beat. The study design incorporated two qualitative methods: a textual analysis of athletes' tweets as they are used by newspaper sports journalists in their coverage and interviews with these journalists—and their editors—to determine their views on and use of Twitter as a news source. Given the aforementioned historical role of sports reporters on the beat, gatekeeping theory provided the theoretical framework for this study.

## Chapter II

### Literature Review

Despite Twitter's relatively short history, a significant amount of research has centered on the presence of athletes on the social media platform and its use as a news source. However, as this brief literature review highlights, few if any of the existing studies have focused on these specific issues within the context of sports reporting, or on how Twitter ultimately is used in the sourcing of information reported, as the present study attempts to do. This section will review existing studies on athletes' Twitter presence and the role of Twitter as a news source. Finally, the theoretical framework for this study—gatekeeping theory, as it applies to Twitter as well as to the selection of sources in reporting in general—will also be discussed.

#### **Athletes and Twitter.**

A number of studies have explored how athletes—and other celebrities—are using Twitter, and what they are tweeting. Although this is not the focus of the present study per sé, this area of research does provide important historical context.

Browning and Sanderson (2012), for example, conducted interviews with 20 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I student-athletes at a single university on their use of Twitter and found that athletes largely use the medium to communicate with each other (i.e., friends at other schools) and to connect with fans. Hambrick et al. (2010), meanwhile, culled the 20 most recent tweets (at the time of study initiation) from 510 (male and female) professional football, baseball, basketball, hockey, and soccer players, as well as professional golfers and found that most of the athletes' tweets were devoted to interacting

with fans (34 percent), although a high percentage (28 percent) also dealt with subjects not related to themselves or their respective sports. Information sharing and content were next at 15 percent and 13 percent, respectively, while promotional tweets numbered only 5 percent.

Although Browning and Sanderson (2012) and Hambrick et al. (2010) employ some of the same methodology as this study, they focus on the athletes' use of Twitter, rather than on the use of their feeds by those who cover them. As such, their work addresses a much different knowledge set. However, both of these studies provided a basis for understanding the content of athletes' Twitter feeds and whether or not this content is a viable source for journalists. In addition, their findings provided an interesting perspective that was used to frame some of the interview questions for the journalists participating in this study.

#### **Twitter as a news source.**

To date, the bulk of the existing published research on the use of Twitter by journalists focuses on the use of the platform in the (relatively) traditional sense—i.e., as a communication channel between reporters and their audience or as a tool for building readership by promoting content through the dissemination of links via tweets. However, there have been a few studies that explore the use of Twitter as a news source.

Knight (2012), for example, assesses the value of social media as a newsgathering tool during the contested Iranian presidential elections of 2009, using four U.K. newspapers as the sample for her analysis. In all, she identified 365 articles on the election; however, only 25 used social media as a source, while 30 articles in her sample focused on the use of social media by the Iranian protesters (Knight, 2012).

Broersma and Graham (2012), on the other hand, identified a far more significant role for Twitter as a news source in their analysis of election coverage in Britain and Holland in

2010. The authors found that Twitter was used as a source far more commonly in Britain than in the Netherlands, particularly by *The Guardian* (more than 120 times during the analysis period). Not surprisingly, politicians were the most common sources of cited tweets, although tweets from the general public were also frequently used. The function of the tweets—as story trigger or as quote—was fairly evenly split across the newspapers used in the analysis (Broersma & Graham, 2012).

In their concluding remarks, Broersma and Graham (2012) note that the use of social media as a news source—particularly as a substitute for the one-on-one interview—may have an adverse effect on journalists’ ability to verify facts and glean additional information for sources; this is particularly interesting in light of the media’s role in helping to create and maintain public perception of celebrities, including star athletes (Hellmueller & Aeschbacher, 2010). Indeed, in their review of research focusing on media and celebrity, Hellmueller and Aeschbacher (2010) highlight celebrities’ use of social media for attracting media attention and, in particular, note Twitter’s growing significance as “an importance source for the news media” as a result of this increased presence (Hellmueller & Aeschbacher, 2010, p. 17). However, they also note that social media’s “open accessibility for all users” (Hellmueller & Aeschbacher, 2010, p. 17) may be contributing to a downsizing of the “gatekeeping processes that exist in other mass media forms” (Hellmueller & Aeschbacher, 2010, p. 17), and that celebrities are able to use social media to “guide how the various channels depict them and therefore how the media and public perceive them” (Hellmueller & Aeschbacher, 2010, p. 18). While they highlight Twitter as a “convenient tool for journalists who can add direct quotes to stories from tweets without having the source in front of a microphone or camera” (Broersma and Graham, 2012, p. 408), Broersma and Graham (2012) also note with

concern that interaction between journalists and their sources appears to be diminishing, as sources seek to frame their own messages on social media. They describe this as a “crisis” of journalism today (Broersma & Graham, 2012, p. 407), particularly given that it has been well documented that agents/representatives and/or publicists often manage the Twitter accounts of celebrities—including professional athletes (Marwick & Boyd, 2011).

Ali Nobil Ahmad, a professor of humanities and social sciences at the University of Lahore in Pakistan, doesn't use the word “crisis” to describe Twitter's potential effect on the gatekeeping role of journalists; however, the title of his paper—“Is Twitter a Useful Tool for Journalists?” (2010)—poses a question that is fundamental to this study, and his work raises many of the same concerns as that of Broersma and Graham (2012). Ahmad (2010) writes that the social media platform “preoccupied editors and reporters” at the U.K.'s *Guardian* newspaper “because of [the] multiplicity of its functions as a news-gathering and marketing tool” (p. 146). However, he also chronicles the downsides of social media, and it is this analysis that is particularly relevant to this study. Ahmad (2010) describes instances in which so-called citizen journalists can use Twitter to scoop traditional media outlets, or call the accuracy of their reportage into question, effectively rendering their role as gatekeepers of news information moot—which is potentially disastrous in the media outlets' pursuit of social and economic capital. This idea of Twitter allowing users (both Tweeters and their followers) to effectively run an end-around on journalists at traditional media outlets—by opening a direct line of communication—is relevant to this study, as part of this research focuses on the gatekeeping role of sports journalists. Ahmad's analysis of the direct communication afforded by social media and its potential effects on the role of journalists framed the present research, particularly the line of questioning used in the in-depth

interviews with sports reporters and editors.

### **Theoretical Framework: Gatekeeping Theory**

Given the concerns raised by Broersma and Graham (2012) and Ahmad (2010), among others, regarding the potential effect of social media—particularly Twitter—on the role of journalists as gatekeepers of information, gatekeeping theory was selected as the theoretical framework for the present study. The theory is relevant to the research described herein due to the aforementioned historical role of sports reporters as gatekeepers of information regarding the athletes and teams on their beats; in addition, source selection—and the determination of source credibility—is part of this gatekeeping function, and as some sports reporters may be turning to Twitter as a source in their beat coverage, it is important to look at these issues within this context.

Gatekeeping theory was first proposed by social psychologist Kurt Lewin in 1943. During World War II, Lewin conducted field studies using Midwestern housewives in an effort to identify the decision-making processes determining families' food consumption (Lewin, 1943). He theorized that all decisions—such as what food to purchase and, eventually, consume—had to pass through multiple channels, and that the food did not move by its own impetus. He believed that the food entering or not entering a channel and moving from one section of a channel to another was affected by a “gatekeeper”—in this case, the person shopping for the food and making the purchasing decisions (Lewin, 1943, p. 37). Interestingly, he found that although it was widely believed at the time that men served as gatekeepers for family food consumption, it was, in fact, women who did most of the purchasing and therefore made most of the decisions.

Lewin's gatekeeping theory was first formally applied to journalism by White (1950) in a seminal study assessing the factors an editor takes into consideration when deciding what is newsworthy. For the purposes of his research, White worked with the wire editor of a morning newspaper (circulation: 30,000), whom he called "Mr. Gates." White asked Mr. Gates to retain all of his rejected wire copy and make notes as to why the item did not make the newspaper (i.e., was not newsworthy). White's aim was to determine if these are subjective decisions based on the editor's own set of experiences, attitudes, and expectations.

White (1950) found that Mr. Gates' story rejections could be classified as follows: first, items not worthy of being reported or, second, items that were covered in other reports appearing in that day's paper. However, he also noted that Mr. Gates had certain news preferences and applied them in his decision-making process. For example, Mr. Gates preferred narrative stories to those that recited facts and figures, and he tended to reject items that hinted of scandal—including an ongoing story at the time involving the Catholic Church (White, 1950).

Numerous studies have either echoed or built upon White's findings (Snider, 1967; Bleske, 1991; Hirsch, 1977; Shoemaker et al., 2001); however, one study is of particular relevance to the present research: Gieber (1956) found that wire editors and reporters were often passive in their role as gatekeepers and that many of their decisions regarding the newsworthiness of certain stories had more to do with the time pressures they faced under deadline. The editor-gatekeepers Gieber studied had little time to critically evaluate or significantly edit the copy that crossed their desk. Therefore, the decisions they made were often based on expediency, rather than any particular value judgment (Gieber, 1956).

In their text reviewing gatekeeping theory as it applies to contemporary mass communication Shoemaker and Vos (2009) note that reporters and editors are on the receiving end of a significant number of stories every day, as part of the surveillance function they play (i.e., seeking out news). Just like any other story that comes across their desks, sports reporters clearly must evaluate the newsworthiness what they find on athletes' Twitter feeds according to previously established criteria (either their own, those established by their organization or, likely, a combination of both) to determine whether or not they constitute a story (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Part of the goal of the present research, then, was to explore this aspect of sports reporters' gatekeeping role with regard to what information gleaned from Twitter they deem worthy of coverage.

#### **Gatekeeping and source selection.**

Another aspect of journalists' gatekeeping function, according to Shoemaker and Reese (1996), involves their selection of sources for the information they ultimately report and the determination of the credibility of these sources and their information. As this aspect of gatekeeping is fundamental to the present research, it is worthy of further exploration.

Indeed, Shoemaker and Reese (1996, p. 134) describe journalists' gatekeeping role "as a complex series of interrelated decisions made at many levels," and they note that one of these decisions involves the selection of sources in reporting. Gans (1979, p. 80) defines sources as "the actors whom journalists observe or interview... and those who only supply background information or story suggestions." Within the context of gatekeeping theory, journalists fulfill their roles as gatekeepers of information in selecting which sources to use in their reporting and in deciding what aspects of the information they provide are of value to their audiences.

Several studies have explored source selection within the context of gatekeeping theory. In their study of journalists' views regarding source credibility during coverage of the North Korea nuclear talks, for example, Seo and Lim (2010) found that reporters from the U.S. and South Korea believe that government officials from their own countries have the most credibility as sources of information, when compared to their counterparts in other countries, and that journalists' perceptions of source credibility ultimately influenced their use of these sources in their coverage. For example, U.S. government officials were "the most prominent sources" for U.S. journalists covering the talks (Seo & Lim, 2010, p. 447); thus, it was their perspectives on the nuclear talks that ultimately reached U.S. audiences, often to the exclusion of others'.

Magee's (2013) analysis of source use on the National Public Radio (NPR) program "All Things Considered" yielded similar findings. In a content analysis that covered stories presented on the program in 1999, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2007, and 2009, she found that public officials were the most commonly cited sources, followed by private sources (e.g., corporate CEOs, lawyers), and expert sources. Magee (2013, p. 246) writes that her findings suggest that, "there is a certain appeal to whom information is coming from and how credible the type of source is to the news audience," at least in the views of those manning the gates at NPR and "All Things Considered."

In general, Twitter's credibility as a source seemingly remains open to debate. In a 2011 survey of reporters, 90% of study subjects reported that their reliance on social media, such as Twitter, has increased, and that social media serve as a reliable tool for sourcing stories (Middleberg/SNCR, 2011). However, a 2009 survey performed by Cision and George Washington University found that Twitter's use as source was more prominent among

journalists working for online-based outlets (75%) and magazines (57%) compared to newspapers (43%). More than half of print media journalists who participated in the survey said they never use Twitter for online research and newspaper reporters (91%) were also more negative than online journalists (76%) regarding the reliability of information from social networking sites (Cision & George Washington University, 2009).

In their study of Twitter's use as a news source and its resultant effect on traditional newsroom routines (within the framework of gatekeeping theory), meanwhile, Moon and Hadley (2014) found that, over a one-year period, at the seven major U.S. media outlets analyzed (*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, ABC News, CBS News, NBC News, Fox News Network, and CNN) a total of 946 newspaper stories and TV news segments (11.2 per day) used Twitter as a news source, but that TV used Twitter as a sole source in 301 stories (50.8%) while newspapers did in only 34 stories (9.7%).

Moon and Hadley (2014, p. 302) write that their findings highlighting the social media platform's limited role as a news source reinforce the notion that journalists still rely on the same reporting tools they used in the "pre-internet age" and that journalists, in general, "still doubt the reliability of online sources." The authors emphasize that the vast majority of Twitter accounts cited in their analysis (70%) were "verified" accounts—meaning: confirmed as being operated by specific sources—of government officials, which, they note, "illustrates the persistence of the journalistic routine to seek credible sources" (Moon & Hadley, 2014, p. 302). It also speaks the need for source credibility, even as applied to online sources.

Interestingly, sports reporters appear to attach greater credibility to athletes' Twitter feeds as news sources than their colleagues on other beats. A study by Reed (2011) at the University of Minnesota found that sportswriters are using athletes' tweets in their reporting.

In all, 61.8% of the 77 sportswriters Reed surveyed said they quoted from athletes' social media pages (both Facebook and Twitter) in articles. Although Reed's analysis attempted to contextualize this application of social media (i.e., as a journalistic source) within the framework of gatekeeping, it did not assess how this content appeared in print (or online) or identify the criteria by which the sportswriters deemed it newsworthy (i.e., as a viable source). Meanwhile, in a survey of beat writers covering the Real Madrid soccer team in Spain, 61% of the journalists reported that they use the players' Twitter accounts and other social media activity as a source in their coverage; additionally, 6% of the survey respondents said they use Twitter "as a backup source" while 11% reporting using it "as the only source" (Sanchez, 2013).

The findings of Reed (2011) and Sanchez (2013) demonstrate that monitoring the social media activities of athletes has indeed become a key aspect of the surveillance function for contemporary sports reporters; in fact, Butcher (2009) notes that some major news organizations have assigned reporters to scour Twitter for newsworthy items and report them to readers via their own feeds (Butcher, 2009).

One could argue that these journalists are effectively engaging in what Shoemaker and Vos (2009, p. 113) describe as "audience gatekeeping." Although audience gatekeeping refers primarily to how the end-user (i.e., the reader or, in the case of Twitter, the follower) evaluates and thereby values the content of an individual tweet before sending it on to *their* followers, its definition—"pass[ing] along already available news items and commenting on them" based on their own criteria for newsworthiness (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 113)—can also be used to describe what sportswriters are doing in reporting what athletes say on Twitter in their coverage.

Indeed, in their discussion of journalist-source relationships within the context of gatekeeping, Shoemaker and Vos (2009, p. 85) emphasize that sources have their own “agendas to push” and, as athletes’ (or at least their representatives) presumably control the content of their tweets, it could be argued that journalists are effectively relinquishing some aspects of their gatekeeping roles in using athletes’ Twitter feeds as sources in their reporting. In a text written long before the advent of Twitter, Shoemaker and Reese (1996, p. 169) write that sources can “influence the news in... subtle ways, by providing the context within which all other information is evaluated [and] by providing usable information that is easier and cheaper to use than that from other sources.” From a gatekeeping perspective, Shoemaker and Vos (2009) note that sources thus effectively regulate the flow of information as it passes through the channels under their control.

This concept of information control as it applies to gatekeeping is particularly relevant here. In their study of the use of Twitter as a news source in British and Dutch newspapers, Broersma and Graham (2013) write in their introductory remarks that Twitter offers reporters “easy access to a large range of interesting and otherwise hard-to-approach sources... [and enables them to] pose questions or simply take a statement from Twitter and include it in a news article” (Broersma & Graham, 2013, p. 447), but that this application of the social media platform fundamentally changes the dynamic between journalists and sources by eliminating the “negotiation-through-conversation” element of the in-depth interview and thereby reducing reporters’ ability to press for additional information and/or verify facts (Broersma & Graham, 2013, p. 449).

As in their previous study, Broersma and Graham (2013) performed a content analysis of articles from eight daily newspapers in Britain and Holland, and their search

yielded 5,813 tweets quoted as news sources in 3,361 articles. Most of the uses of Twitter as sources appeared in human-interest stories (34.4 percent); however, sports articles were next on the list with 22.3 percent of the uses.

This latter number is of particular note, due in part to the present study as well as the findings of Paulussen and Harder (2014) in their study of the use of social media as a news source in Belgian newspapers. Although their research indicates that social media's role as a news source remains relatively small among Belgian print media reporters, the authors conclude that, particularly within the context of celebrity and sports reporting, social media is not subject to the aforementioned rules with regard to "credibility in journalistic sourcing" (Paulussen & Harder, 2014, p. 549). Indeed, they write, their data "challenge the assumption... that in relation to social media journalists would favor official over unofficial sources" (p. 549). In their study, journalists referred primarily to social media in stories on "ordinary citizens, celebrities, and sports people" (Paulussen & Harder, 2014, p. 549).

Their findings are particularly noteworthy for this study when considered within the context of the journalist-source relationship as described by Shoemaker and Vos (2009). Shoemaker and Vos (2009, p. 85) write that reporters expect sources to be "open-door informants" who give journalists all of the available information and allow the journalists to decide what passes through the gate; conversely, though, sources want reporters to be "open gatekeepers [who] essentially [pass] unmediated information straight through the gate" (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 85). In their view, sources and journalist-gatekeepers benefit from their mutual relationship: journalists, of course, receive access to information; however, sources receive access to audiences through media coverage. By promulgating athletes' tweets through their reportage, are sports reporters who access athletes' Twitter feeds as a

source effectively relinquishing some of their gatekeeping power to their sources? As a primary aim of this study was to address whether or not the selection of Twitter as a source does in fact maintain their gatekeeping role, given the direct communication afforded by the medium, the research methods described in the following section were designed, in part, to address this fundamental question.

## Chapter III

### Methods and Research Questions (RQs)

This study was designed to answer the following research questions (RQ):

[RQ1]: How are newspaper sports reporters using the Twitter feeds of sports personalities in their beat coverage?

[RQ2]: How has Twitter affected the way newspaper sports reporters perceive their roles with regard to disseminating news and information about the athletes they cover?

The study design was formulated to address these questions within the framework of gatekeeping theory using two distinct qualitative approaches. In the first, textual analysis was used to analyze how athletes' Twitter feeds are being used in mainstream sports coverage in daily newspapers, both in print and online. In the second, in-person interviews with a sample population of sports reporters and their editors attempted to glean the criteria by which these uses are judged to be newsworthy. The goal was to fill existing gaps within the literature regarding the content and context of reporting on athletes' tweets in the mainstream sports press, as well as exploration of the traditional role of sports reporters as gatekeepers of this content.

### Explanation of Terms

For the purposes of this study, the term *newspapers* refers to major metropolitan dailies (i.e., published seven-days per week), both broadsheet and tabloid; content published both online and in print will be used for this analysis. Eight newspapers were used in the textual analysis portion of the project, and as the source of interview subjects: *The Boston Globe*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Dallas Morning News*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Miami*

*Herald, The New York Daily News, The New York Times, and USA Today.* The selected newspapers represent a cross section of publications from the northeast (*The New York Daily News, The Boston Globe*), southeast (*The Miami Herald*), northern Midwest (*The Chicago Tribune*), southern Midwest (*The Dallas Morning News*), and west coast (*The Los Angeles Times*) as well as two newspapers with national and/or international audiences (*USA Today, The New York Times*). Each of these publications was also selected based upon the recognized quality of their sports sections. All of the newspapers included in the analysis have been recognized by the Associated Press Sports Editors for the quality of their sports reporting in their print, online editions, or both (APSE, 2013). As these publications are thus perceived as leaders in the field of sports reporting, their policies and practices with regard to the use of Twitter as a news source in sports coverage should be indicative and informative with the regard to national patterns in this area.

The theoretical definition of sports reporters, as described by Kanigel (2006), is: reporters who break news or describe sporting-related events and give readers a sense of what it was like on the field or court, in the stands and in the locker room; sports reporters are typically assigned beats, usually teams (e.g., the New York Jets) or sports (e.g., professional football).

Twitter is a social media tool that provides users with real-time information and communication capabilities. The communication platform—or “tweets,” the messages Twitter users transmit to their followers—are limited to 140 characters in length, but can also include photos, videos and links (Twitter, 2014). Twitter users can transmit messages or tweets to their followers, or follow others on the medium to gain access to their tweets—or both (Twitter, 2014).

## **Methodology Overview: Textual Analysis**

For the present study, the sports sections of the print and online editions for each of the eight newspapers included in the analysis were searched, for a one-month period beginning January 1, 2014 and ending January 31, 2014, and coverage of the so-called “big four” U.S. sports—baseball, football, basketball, and hockey—was used as the basis for this analysis. January was selected for the analysis period because it is arguably the busiest time on the U.S. sports calendar. The professional basketball and hockey leagues—the NBA and National Hockey League (NHL), respectively—are in the midst of their regular seasons at this time, and during the month professional football (the National Football League, or NFL) is engaged in its playoff tournament leading up to the biggest of American sporting events, the Super Bowl. Major League Baseball (MLB), meanwhile, is merely weeks away from the start of Spring Training (its preseason), and January is a time when many player and management moves are made in advance of the approaching season in April.

Print editions of the newspapers included in the analysis were accessed through Missouri University School of Journalism Library’s ProQuest Database (for *The Boston Globe*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Daily News*, *The New York Times*, and *USA Today*) or the New York Public Library’s Newsbank database (for *The Dallas Morning News* and *The Miami Herald*). For online-only articles, the archive search tools on the web site for each newspaper was used for the initial search; however, a secondary search was performed using LexisNexis to ensure that all relevant articles for the proposed analysis were culled.

Terms used for all searches will be “Twitter,” “tweet,” “tweets,” and “tweeted,” along with the names of the four major U.S. sports (baseball, basketball, football, and hockey) and

the names of the respective leagues (MLB, NBA, NFL, and NHL), with the goal of capturing all instances in which athletes' Twitter feeds cited by the sports reporters covering them. The subsequent textual analysis was designed to elucidate how these tweets are being used, and contextualize them. Once examples were identified for inclusion in the analysis, the researcher reviewed the way in which the athletes' tweets were used in coverage and attempted to categorize them based on how they are used. Using the approach of conventional textual analysis, these categories were determined based upon the collected sample. Occasionally, searches yielded articles that did not involve coverage of MLB, NBA, NFL, or NHL beats, or instances where tweets were cited but not as a part of beat coverage for these sports; these items were culled from the data and not included in the final analysis.

In all, beat coverage of the four major sports in the eight newspapers included in the analysis yielded 74 articles that cited Twitter as a source during the one-month study period. Of these, 11 were published in print-only editions of the eight newspapers and 25 were published online-only, which is of note given that print and online publications have distinct deadline schedules. The textual analysis component of this study assessed how Twitter was used as a source in these 74 articles.

Textual analysis has been described as “a preferred method for identifying... latent meaning, and... a powerful tool for researchers who seek to produce theoretically valid interpretations of news content” (Bronstein, 2005, p. 789). According to Jensen and Jankowski (1991), it allows researchers to look at media text closely and as a meaningful whole to, hopefully, reveal subtle nuances of language and meaning (i.e., interpretations) that are not always explicit. The approach also allows for thorough examination of themes, keywords, and metaphors that give rise to meanings within texts.

Textual analysis attempts to frame culture as a narrative or story-telling process in which particular texts connect to larger stories within society (Jensen & Jankowski, 1991). The approach has indeed been applied to newspaper texts extensively (Bronstein, 2005; Shah, 1999), and recent studies have also applied the methodology within gatekeeping theory (Moody, 2008), the theoretical framework of the proposed research.

Briefly, textual analysis was first proposed by Hall (1975), as part of a study designed to assess newspapers' coverage of social change in Britain in the years after World War II. Hall considered the approach an extension of the quantitative approach of content analysis, which focuses more on quantifying and/or categorizing text to explore its emphasis and meaning. Hall's textual analysis, conversely, analyzes not only what is said, but also why it is said and how the reader might interpret it (Hall, 1975). The approach allows researchers to examine the ways in which events or ideas are given importance, as well as how the events and ideas are to be understood (Shah, 1999).

It is this aspect of textual analysis that makes it the perfect method for use in this research. As the primary goal of this study was to assess Twitter's role as a source for sportswriters, textual analysis was used to gain understanding of its significance—or importance—in this function by revealing exactly how it is used.

A review of the literature reveals that textual analyses of the use of Twitter as a news source are lacking, particularly within the field of sports journalism. In fact, to date, the bulk of existing research into the use of Twitter by journalists has focused on its non-journalistic functions (i.e., as a tool for communicating with their audiences). Current research into the use of Twitter as a news source has largely employed quantitative methodology—typically content analysis—to categorize how the tweets are used. As social media use by athletes—

and their fans—continues to grow, it will likely have dramatic effects on the roles and influence, as gatekeepers of information, of those covering them. It is vital then that studies attempt to fill the existing knowledge gap with regard to the context of Twitter sourcing in press coverage.

### **Methodological Overview: Interviews**

The second component of the proposed research involved in-depth interviews with sports reporters and their editors. The goal was to conduct interviews with a minimum of 20 sports reporters—ideally, representing each newspaper and sport included in the textual analysis—either by phone or in person. During these interviews (see Appendix A for Interview Questionnaires), the sports reporters and their editors were asked about their use of athletes’ Twitter feeds as a news source, their newspapers’ policies regarding said-same, and how, if at all, athletes taking to Twitter—and their reportage of it—affects their role as gatekeepers of information regarding these athletes to their readers (who may be fans, and thus Twitter followers, of these athletes).

Within the context of audience research, Livingstone (2010) believes that interviews serve an important function in qualitative research by giving study subjects a “voice.” As Fontana and Frey (2000, p. 698) note, in-depth interviews yield “negotiated, contextually based results,” and that is exactly what this component of the composed research sought to produce.

The interviews for this study were designed to gather understanding as to why Twitter has developed into a source and what reporters and editors see as its present and potential future role as such, as well as gain insight into how these writers and editors make decisions regarding tweet-based stories’ newsworthiness. Interviews have proved to be an effective

research approach in other studies involving journalists, the study population of the proposed research (Besley & Roberts, 2010). According to Besley and Roberts (2010, p. 70), “journalists represent excellent candidates for qualitative interview projects [because] they have access to unique knowledge, and the nature of their craft means they can often communicate their experiences in meaningful and reflective ways.” Indeed, multiple studies have relied on interviews with journalists as part of investigations into a range of media-related topics (Attfield & Dowell, 2003; Besley & McComas, 2007; Besley & Roberts, 2010).

As the use of Twitter as a news source falls into the category of “media-related,” the interviews with sports reporters and editors in this study were designed to augment and contextualize the findings of the textual analysis, and there is precedent for their efficacy in this function. In their study of framing of the so-called War on Terror by reporters at *USA Today*, for example, Lewis and Reese (2009) used interviews to determine the role reporters’ personal experiences and beliefs had in the development of the frames they found.

The interviews for this study were designed based on Creswell’s (2009) approach. Creswell (2009) suggests that semi-structured personal interviews begin with an “ice-breaker” (p. 183) question and four to five main questions. Each of these main questions can then have four to five subquestions or “probes” (p. 183) that encourage participant-respondents to provide additional detail and thereby augment their responses to the main questions. The questionnaires were developed with this concept in mind.

As noted previously, interview subjects were selected from the eight newspapers included in the textual analysis component of the proposed research. Beat writers covering teams in each of the four “major (U.S.) sports”—baseball, basketball, football, and hockey—

for each of the eight newspapers in the study were invited to participate by email. As many of the papers included in the analysis serve large metropolitan markets with multiple professional sports teams, a population of 44 beat writers was available and thus invited to participate. At minimum, the goal was to interview at least four beat writers covering each of the four major sports, in order to provide a diversity of opinion or what Creswell (1998, p. 64) describes as “saturation”—or the point at which the collection of new data does not shed any new light on the issue under study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Sports editors from each of the eight newspapers were also invited to participate—again, by email—in order to learn the publications’ policies with regard to the use of Twitter as a news source. All interviews were conducted by phone, and all interviews were transcribed.

As this research involved human subjects, IRB approval was required and obtained. An informed consent protocol was developed and provided to all interview subjects (Appendix B). Although their answers to interview questions were used in the final analysis of the proposed research, respondents were assured that their names would be kept confidential to protect their privacy and, hopefully, encourage honest responses to interview questions.

In all, 44 reporters were contacted, via email, and asked to participate in the analysis: four from *The Boston Globe*, six from *The Chicago Tribune*, four from *The Dallas Morning News*, six from *The Los Angeles Times*, four from *The Miami Herald*, 10 from *The New York Daily News*, five from *The New York Times*, and five from *USA Today*. In all cases, all listed beat writers for the four major U.S. sports were contacted. Each prospective participant was contacted a maximum of two times, all by email.

Of these, 25 reporters responded to the request to be interviewed, with five indicating their refusal to participate (four indicated they were too busy and the fifth was not interested in exploring the topic). In the end, 20 reporters agreed to be interviewed, and all eight newspapers used in the textual analysis component of the research were represented: with four reporters from *The Boston Globe*, three from *The Chicago Tribune*, two from *The Dallas Morning News*, three from *The Los Angeles Times*, one from *The Miami Herald*, three from *The New York Daily News*, two from *The New York Times*, and two from *USA Today*. There was a fairly equal distribution among the beat responsibilities of the study participants: six covered football, six covered baseball, four covered basketball, and four covered hockey. Time on their respective beats among the study participants ranged from less than one year to 28 years, with an average of approximately 9.5 years.

In addition, the sports editors of all eight newspapers included in the textual analysis portion of this study were contacted by email and invited to participate in a phone interview. Seven of the eight editors invited to participate responded to the request. One editor refused to participate, and another editor ultimately could not be reached to schedule an interview. In the end, five of the eight sports editors were interviewed for the study.

For brief biographical sketches on study participants with regard to their Twitter experience, please see Appendix C. In the sections that follow, the reporters' and editors' responses with regard to the use of Twitter as a news source in sports coverage are summarized. To protect their identities, each of the reporters interviewed have been coded based the sport they cover (Football Writer A, Basketball Writer A, etc.); similarly, the sports editors have also been coded (Editor A, Editor B, etc.). In addition, all respondents are referred to using masculine pronouns (although there were female respondents), again to

protect their identities. Not all of the responses are included; rather, responses that best represent the differing perspectives of all interview subjects have been selected. In some cases, bracketed phrases are used to obscure information that would provide clues as to the identities of the respondents or to keep their responses within the narrative flow of this paper.

Study participants were asked if they were active on Twitter, how often they tweeted, and how often they checked the tweets of those they follow. In addition, participants were asked what their newspapers' policies were with regard to their Twitter activity—i.e., whether presence on the social media platform was mandatory. All of the reporters who participated in the research indicated that they were on Twitter themselves; however, the responses regarding their activity on the social media platform varied from respondent to respondent, with many indicating that their presence on the platform decreased significantly when the teams on their beats were in their respective off-seasons. Most reported that they tweeted six to 10 times per day, on average, although some said that they tweeted as much as 100 times per day on game days or when there was important news about the teams on their beats.

In terms of checking the Twitter feeds of those they follow on the social media platform, several writers answered that they check “constantly” or “nearly constantly.” Three writers—Basketball Writer A, Football Writer B, and Football Writer E—explained that they have “apps” on their phones that alert them when someone they follow tweets. Similarly, all five of the editors interviewed indicated that they have Twitter accounts, and use these accounts for professional, and sometimes personal, purposes. The level of their activity on Twitter varied from respondent to respondent. For example, Editor A noted:

Some days I'm much more active than others, it depends on how my day is going, but certainly I try to tweet at least three or four times a day.... Throughout my workday, I've got Twitter open and I'm checking [it] with some frequency. I'm following on our staff and stuff religiously, but I monitor it throughout the day.

When asked about their respective newspapers' policies with regard to Twitter activity on the part of editorial staffers, most of the responding reporters indicated that their presence on the social media platform was "mandatory" or "required" or at least "strongly encouraged." One said that he was never told to start a Twitter account, but that "all the other writers at [the paper] are on there and it would be odd if I wasn't." Several writers indicated that they didn't know their newspaper's policy, with one writer stating, "That's a better question for my boss [but] it's an unstated rule." Interestingly, reporters from the same newspaper interviewed for the study often characterized their employers' policies differently. One baseball writer interviewed, for example, noted that reporters in the department were "ranked" based on the number of tweets they sent out and the number of followers they have on Twitter. However, other reporters from this same paper interviewed for the study did not mention this policy. Similarly, a football writer interviewed said that he believed his employer "owned" his Twitter account, but his colleagues who were interviewed did not indicate this.

If Twitter presence on the part of sports reporters was "mandatory" or "strongly encouraged," the perceived reasons for this varied from reporter to reporter. However, most said they believed their editors want them to "interact" with readers and drive traffic to their stories posted online. And, in terms of their newspapers' policies with regard to the content of their tweets, many respondents indicated that they were unaware of formal guidelines or

restrictions. Baseball Writer A, for example, said that he is unsure of his paper's policy but that he is "not going to submit a story where I'm cussing, I'm not going to submit a story where I'm disparaging another writer...it's basically do on Twitter as you would in a story for the [paper]."

Among the editors, responses as to their respective newspapers' policies with regard to the content of writer/editor tweets focused on the content rather than the level of activity. For example, Editor A explained:

Our policy here is that everyone needs to keep in mind that anything that they tweet or anything they post in any sort of social media is going to be ultimately from or representative of them as an employee of the [paper]... Essentially we don't want people tweeting or publishing something on Facebook that would be inappropriate for a publication in the paper or for running online as part of the paper. That said, I do some personal tweeting as well but I don't treat it like a bar stool where I am completely free in what I do.

When asked if their presence—or the presence of their reporters—on Twitter was required, the sports editor respondents answered in the affirmative.

Interview subjects were not asked about other forms of social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram), and, for the most part, they did not volunteer their opinions regarding their own use of these platforms or their potential uses as news sources. Editor C did note that he prefers Facebook for his own social media activity, while Basketball Writer C reported that he "refuses" to follow one of the athletes on his beat on Facebook because the medium provides little newsworthy information. Hockey Writer D also referenced Facebook in his assessment of the impact of Twitter and all social media on the gatekeeping role of sports

reporters, but focused most of his response on Twitter.

### **Data Analysis**

Data for this study—i.e., the text examples of Twitter as a news source collected during the textual analysis and the responses of study subjects during the interview component—were analyzed using conventional approaches. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), conventional analysis approaches are appropriate when the goal of the study is to describe a phenomenon and existing literature on that phenomenon is limited. In this case, Twitter as a news sources is the phenomenon and, as demonstrated in the literature review section, existing knowledge of this phenomenon, at least from the perspective of gatekeeping theory, is limited.

For conventional analysis of text data, Hsieh and Shannon (2005, p. 1279) note that, “Researchers avoid using preconceived categories [and] instead [allow] the categories and names for categories to flow from the data.” This approach is also known as inductive category development (Mayring, 2000). In this approach, the researchers “immerse themselves in the data to allow new insights to emerge” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1279). The data here followed Hsieh and Shannon’s (2005) suggested approach and proceeded through the following steps:

1. The researcher read collected text word-for-word to derive codes, first by noting words from the text that “that appear to capture key thoughts or concepts” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1279).
2. The researcher made notes regarding the initial analysis of the text.
3. Labels or codes were derived from the texts; if needed, these codes were sorted into categories.
4. Definitions of each code/category were developed.
5. The texts were categorized/coded according to the definitions developed.

## Chapter IV

### **Results: Overview of Findings on RQ1**

RQ1 asked: How are newspaper sports reporters using the Twitter feeds of sports personalities in their beat coverage of the four major U.S. sports? The following section summarizes the findings of the textual analysis, with regard to the use of Twitter as a news source in sports reporting, as well as the responses of the sports reporters and editors at the eight newspapers included in the analysis as they pertain to the uses of Twitter as a source. Finally, respondents' opinions as to the factors that may influence Twitter's use as a news source in sports reporting, such as deadline and competitive pressures, will be reviewed.

### **Findings of the Textual Analysis**

Overall, the textual analysis of coverage of the four major U.S. sports within the eight newspapers included in this study revealed that Twitter does indeed play a significant role as a news source. In general, athletes' tweets appeared in the following contexts in sports coverage in the eight newspapers studied during the analysis period:

1. in place of a quote from an in-person and/or phone/email interview;
2. as the source of breaking news, such as the signing of a new contract or personal announcement (i.e., personal appearance or family news);
3. as the "trigger" (Broersma & Graham, 2012) of a story (where a tweet is deemed provocative/controversial and/or offensive); and,
4. as a source of perspective on public opinion or a measure of social standing or engagement (i.e., references to response to certain news events on Twitter).

Among the eight newspapers analyzed for this study, some patterns related to Twitter's use as a news source emerged. First, when quoting a tweet directly, all eight newspapers included in the study printed and/or published the entire tweet (or portions of it)

verbatim, leaving errors in grammar and spelling unchanged (although occasionally the papers acknowledged the errors with a “sic” notation). Also, when quoting exact tweets, all eight newspapers left in all abbreviations and slang terms used therein, without defining them. An example of this can be found in a Twitter quote from former NFL player Deion Sanders, which appeared in two of the papers included in the analysis. The tweet/quote read: “Great Job Goat!” “Goat” is a commonly used slang acronym for “Greatest of All Time.” None of the articles quoting the tweet defined the acronym’s meaning.

Additionally, the newspapers included in the analysis do not appear to have a consistent approach for attributing quotes and/or news items picked up from individual Twitter accounts, although all articles clearly defined Twitter as the source, where applicable. Articles quoting from the Twitter feed of an athlete attributed quotes as “Player X wrote on Twitter,” “Player X posted on Twitter,” “Player X said on Twitter,” and/or “Player X tweeted,” and these attributions were used interchangeably within each of the newspapers included in the analysis. Also, some articles cited the player’s specific Twitter “handle” or account name, while others did not.

### **Twitter as part of the beat.**

Most of the writers interviewed reported that they consider following the athletes on their beat on Twitter as part of their beat coverage, although only one of the respondents noted that he had been told as much by his editor. Basketball Writer A, for example, stated that he believes part of his beat involves knowing what players said on Twitter “at all times” because he feels he needs to cover the beat “from all angles.” He explained:

It’s nothing I’ve talked to about with the editor; it’s simply a byproduct of the fact that the [team] is on Twitter all the time, the main players on the team, and... often

what they say on Twitter is newsworthy because they're such a high-profile [team]. It's just a normal part of the beat now.

Football Writer F was the only writer who said that his editors had specifically told him to follow the Twitter feeds of the athletes on his beat, and his paper had established a so-called "digital desk" to follow local pro athletes' activity on social media. He noted:

If a tweet goes out that we don't do something on immediately, whoever is working digital desk that night will see it and usually text us and say, 'Hey, we're going to throw a blog post up on this or were you going to do something on this?' So there's also a backstop, although not a consistent one because it just depends on who's in that night, that's supposed to be their lookout.

But even if he hadn't been instructed to cover athletes' Twitter accounts, Football Writer F said:

It's something I never thought about initially obviously 15 years ago is how this factors into beat coverage, but... [my editors] expect me to [cover Twitter]... I think there's certainly recognition that you cannot do the beat in today's world... unless you're very strong in this.

Football Writer F also added that he believes his Twitter coverage is part of his performance evaluation.

Hockey Writer A, the only writer interviewed who does not follow any players or coaches from the team he covers on Twitter, reported that he does follow *the team's* Twitter feed. When asked why he doesn't follow players or coaches, he explained, "I go to their [Twitter feed] if there is something going on, but for the most part I don't see anything of use [on their Twitter feeds], nothing that is going to help my coverage." Neither his paper nor his

editors have a policy with regard to following athletes on Twitter. “It’s never been told to me that I have to follow certain people so I don’t think there’s any policy.” He has covered the feed of a player “when it is a significant event, something controversial or maybe even insightful.” He described an incident in which one of the players on the team sent out an offensive tweet. When asked how he knew about it when he doesn’t follow the players on Twitter, he responded, “Someone on the [newspaper] staff told me.”

Many of the writers interviewed said they have taken the practice one step further, following team executives and even, in the case of Baseball Writer B, the wives and girlfriends of players as well. Baseball Writer A, Basketball Writer D, and Hockey Writer D all indicated that they follow team coaches and front-office staff on Twitter, in addition to the players.

Baseball Writer E reported that in addition to following all of the players on the team’s Major League roster, he covers some of the team’s key minor-league players as well. He explained:

In the case of minor league players, sometimes they’ll inadvertently flip up and say ‘Excited about being called up to the big leagues’ or something like that and you’ll find out that they’re getting called up before the team announces it. For anybody, especially in baseball, any beat writer, you almost have to follow as many guys as you can find the handles for.

The sports editors interviewed were also asked if they follow local professional athletes on Twitter—and, if they require or encourage their writers to do so. Editor A reported that he follows athletes on Twitter, but said:

I don’t follow as many as say our beat reporter would... he would obviously follow

every player and monitor that fairly closely. I follow select athletes or sports figures who may use Twitter to write something that I'm guessing may be of interest but I'm not religious about following every individual in town.

All of the responding editors indicated that they expect their beat writers to follow the athletes on the teams they cover. Editor B said, "I do see a value in following the people that you cover."

However, in spite of this expectation, none of the editors interviewed said they have made following athletes on Twitter a formal policy. Editor E explained:

We have professional people who know what to do, so it's not like I have to call them and say, 'Follow this person.' They do that on their own. We rely on [Twitter] quite a bit. It's one way in the age of very little access provided by leagues and teams to hear the voice of the athletes.

Most of the writers interviewed for the study said they believe that following the athletes on their beat on Twitter has no effect on their relationship, or the reporter/subject dynamic; however, many of them cautioned that it is still a valid concern. Basketball Writer D said:

I did a story... about social media gaffes by professional athletes. I think players having seen [gaffes] from other players are more aware they have to be cautious about what they say and do... If they [are] aware that I [am] following them I'm sure they are trying to be more careful.

Football Writer C added that while he follows the athletes he covers on Twitter, he does not tag them in posts, noting:

You don't want to blur those lines, you want to keep it as reporter/source so to speak

and not sort of try to strike up [an unprofessional relationship]. So we just kind of generally steer clear of doing that for the sake of not changing that relationship.

When asked if following athletes on social media changed the dynamic between the beat writers and the people they cover, the editors answered in the negative. For example, Editor B said:

Not to my knowledge it hasn't. I keep sort of a healthy distance as do my writers from who these people are. I'm a firm believer in the philosophy of 'no cheering in the press box,' so I'm not following them for my own personal interests, I'm following them for my professional interests to know to sort of see how their lives are going.

### **Tweets As Quotes**

The textual analysis revealed that all of the newspapers included in the analysis used athletes' tweets in place of quotes from direct interviews (in person or by phone) with the players. For example, *The Boston Globe* on January 22 published in its print editions an article on the resignation of New England Patriots assistant coach Pepper Johnson, which quoted from a Patriots player's Twitter feed. The article notes that Vince Wilfork "did take to Twitter" to comment on Johnson's decision. According to the paper, Wilfork "wrote" that:

Pepper Johnson will always be a part of my family. One thing about football is the bonds you make that go beyond the team you work for. In my 10 years of being a NEP he has always been a constant and a hell of a coach. But change is always a constant in life. All good things must come to an end. I wish him nothing but the best and I know he will continue to have an impact on football.

Similarly, *The Dallas Morning News* in its print and online editions on January 16 reported that former Dallas Cowboys head coach Wade Phillips used Twitter to campaign for

another NFL job, expressing his disappointment at not getting any interviews. The article quoted one tweet directly, which read, “Disappointed not even an interview after 7 straight full seasons of top 10 D with 3 different teams. Last 5 times as D C= playoffs 1st yr.” The quote was attributed to Phillips’ Twitter account, @sonofbum.

On January 18, several of the papers included in the analysis published a story on the Los Angeles Lakers’ Kobe Bryant visit to a Boston College marketing class during the team’s road trip to Boston in January and had a positive Twitter exchange with students afterward. The article quoted a tweet by Bryant, which read “Learn, Learn, Learn. Thank you #BC #internationalmarketing, Education never stops.” Many of the papers included in the analysis ran a screen grab of Bryant’s tweet in online versions of this story.

Finally, several papers in the analysis on quoted from Minnesota Vikings defensive back Harrison Smith’s Twitter account on January 3. Smith was coming to the defense of his coach, Mike Priefer, who had been criticized by former Vikings punter Chris Kluwe in a Deadspin.com commentary. Kluwe accused the coach and the team of cutting him because of his views on same-sex marriage. *The Times* reported that Smith wrote on Twitter, “Since I’ve had the privilege of playing for Mike Priefer he has been nothing but a class act coach and a respectful human being.”

Interview respondents supported the use of athletes’ tweets in place of actual quotes, on an as-needed basis. Basketball Writer A, for example, said, “If I’m going to quote someone on Twitter, it’s only going to be because it’s something that’s out there in the public. It’s reporting.” Similarly, Football Writer C explained that he would “absolutely” quote an athlete’s tweet “if it was relevant to what we are covering. I think that in many ways it’s their voice and if you can’t get it another way and they post it on their Twitter account, I

think it's fair game to use for a quote.”

Football Writer D explained that Twitter often mitigates problems of direct access to a player for quotes. He noted:

We'd rather not quote them off Twitter but we don't have a direct pipeline to these guys every day. Some won't give you their cell or e-mail, some won't answer the phone and they're not in the locker room every day necessarily, so there are times where it's the only way to get their thoughts on something. Ideally I would rather talk to them about whatever the issue is but... if I can't reach them or don't know where to reach them and I have to quote them on Twitter, I'll do it.

Similarly, Basketball Writer C described a scenario in which the best player on the team he covers was cut off from direct access to the press—at team practices or games—because he was out with an injury. He said:

The NBA has a rule that if you're hurt, you don't have to really talk to the media that often. So a lot of the time, the only way to find out what [he] was thinking was to go to Twitter or his Facebook page. Plenty of news items came from his Twitter feeds this past season because he was so unavailable for a six- or seven-month period.

All of the editors interviewed for this study said they support the use of Twitter as a source for quotes on the beat. For example, Editor D noted:

Whether it's good journalism I guess maybe we'll find out at some point for sure. But I just don't think you can eliminate information just because of the medium you're receiving it. I think you have to evaluate it like all information you. You may be told something face to face by someone you may not trust, you don't use it, and the same thing could be with Twitter.

Several of the sports editors interviewed indicated that one of the key procedures they've implemented when Twitter is used as a source concerns the attribution of the tweet(s) in the final story. Editor B and Editor D both said they had specific policies in place for attributions when beat writers quote from Twitter. Editor D said:

We have to acknowledge it in our written material. So if we're using [Twitter], we have to say where the information came from. So it would be, '[Player x] said he's not returning to the [team] on his Twitter account yesterday. If we're going to attribute something that we found out on Twitter, we're going to say how we got the information, that we received the information on Twitter so the reader knows we didn't actually speak to the athlete directly. You tell the reader how you acquired the information, then everything goes along with that, that it's on Twitter, that it could very well be a press agent doing the tweeting under the Twitter handle. You cover yourself with that.

Added Editor C:

If we quote [from Twitter], we'll quote misspellings and make sure to state where [the quote] came from, which has sort of an explanation as to why something might be abbreviated or misspelled. But I think everything should meet the attribution standards.

### **Tweets as a Source for Breaking News**

The textual analysis component of this study found that several of the newspapers cited athletes' Twitter feeds as the source of breaking news about the athlete or his team. On January 11, for example, *The New York Daily News* and *The New York Times*, in print and online, cited Twitter as the source of breaking news when they reported that New York

Yankees outfielder Vernon Wells effectively used Twitter to announce his retirement.

*The Miami Herald* published a syndicated news article provided by The Sports Network on January 24 in which it was reported that David Diehl, of the NFL's New York Giants, announced his retirement via Twitter. On January 28, an online-only article in *The Dallas Morning News* reported that Scott Linehan had been hired as an assistant by the Dallas Cowboys. The source of this news was "Linehan's oldest son, Matthew, a redshirt freshman quarterback at the University of Idaho, [who] tweeted, 'Proud of my father and happy to be a part of #CowboysNation!!!!'"

Finally, Twitter was acknowledged as the source of breaking news in an article on Red Sox infielder Will Middlebrooks that appeared in print and online editions of *The Globe* on January 31. The article notes that Middlebrooks publicly acknowledged his controversial relationship with a female reporter covering the team for the New England Sports Network (NESN) by tweeting confirmation to his followers. The article did not quote from his Twitter feed.

The writers interviewed for this study said they rely on Twitter as a source for breaking news because, often, players will make announcements on Twitter before their teams have had a chance to do so formally. Baseball Writer F, for example, encountered a situation where a player on the team he covers announced his retirement via tweet. He said, "I still called the team to ask, 'Is this true?'"

Another baseball writer, Baseball Writer E, noted:

My job is to get the story or write about something, no matter where it comes from. So if something were to come about because of Twitter, while I'd prefer that it come out of the clubhouse, I can't control that. You need to react to it no matter where it

comes from. I guess you've got to kind of look at it like if...[the player] had said it in the locker room or in front of a group of reporters, it would have been just as big a story.

Though Basketball Writer D acknowledged Twitter's role as a source for breaking news on the beat, he emphasized that its use did not, and should not, replace more traditional reporting work. He explained:

Twitter can point you to information and point you to stories, [but] it can't get you all the way there. You have to do the legwork on your own, verifying things and talking to people, doing your own research. I've heard reporters say about Wikipedia, 'You don't quote from Wikipedia but it can be a good place to start, just to get your bearings and get a general sense of things.' You obviously double check everything with other sources and what not, but just in terms of kind of getting the lay of the land a little bit, and Twitter can be a little bit like that too.

With regard to Twitter's role as a source for breaking news, the sports editors essentially agreed with Basketball Writer D that this use for the medium is acceptable, with some caveats. For example, Editor A said:

I think you judge the newsworthiness of what an athlete tweets the same way you would judge the newsworthiness of any information you get. We'll often use or occasionally use stuff that people tweet out and go ahead and develop it into a story. If there's something of note that's worth pursuing, we'll pursue it and try to develop it into a broader story might be around that topic.

Editor A added:

I think it's a really important tool and I think it's a valuable tool and I think it's

something that you can use to your advantage to help what you do and something that sources can use to their advantage as well to try to get their messages out the way they want them. Simply because of that, that's why we have to look at any tweets that come out from individuals very critically because they by definition come with an agenda.

Similarly, Editor B, described Twitter as:

A really good tip sheet if you know how to use it... in that way it's the best tip sheet that's ever been invented. But then... you apply the same news judgment and filters that you apply on anything else... The same ways that you test the veracity of what you're being told, you have to apply the same sort of thinking to Twitter. It's just that it's been brought to you in a different way.

### **Tweets as the trigger of a Story**

The textual analysis also revealed that athletes' tweets often became stories in and of themselves in several newspapers included in the analysis. This phenomenon typically occurred after the athlete tweeted a controversial or provocative statement or, in some cases, a photo. On January 10, for example, *USA Today* reported that Indianapolis Colts punter Pat McAfee was fined McAfee after he tweeted a photo of himself following a playoff victory; the photo also showed one of his teammates, quarterback Andrew Luck, naked in the background.

On January 17 and 18, several of the papers included in the analysis covered an incident involving wide receiver Davone Bess, of the NFL's Cleveland Browns, in which his Twitter account became the center of the story. Bess reportedly posted photos of marijuana plants on his Twitter account on January 16. An article on the story in *The New York Times*,

for example, noted that, “Bess... posted a photo of a small package of what appeared to be marijuana. Some of the substance was out of the bag and on a table. The photo was later deleted.”

Finally, on a lighter note, on January 18, a tweet by the Boston Celtics’ Rajon Rondo was deemed worthy of a story by several of the newspapers in the study. Rondo sent out a “cryptic” tweet just before he returned after missing nearly a year due to injury. The tweet read, “29,233,380 seconds.” The number referred to the time between Rondo’s February 13, 2013 knee surgery and his return to competitive action.

Reporters and editors interviewed for this study acknowledged that there are many instances when an athlete’s tweet becomes the story in and of itself. As Football Writer F explained, “If a guy says something on there that’s embarrassing or abrasive or homophobic or something like that... if he’s a public figure and he’s putting it out on his Twitter account, I think he opens himself up and it has to be followed up on.”

Football Writer D recalled an instance when a player on the team he covers “told an off-color joke [and] it became a much bigger deal than it should have been” but that he felt he had to cover it and his editors expected him to; he added that his editors “understood that it became a story, so whether you like it or not you kind of have to address it somehow.”

All five editors interviewed acknowledged that their sections have published news stories in which an athlete’s tweet has been the subject of the story in and of itself. Editor B, for instance, said:

I don’t have a problem with it if we’re certain that the account is written by that athlete. If the account is written by a manager or a flak or some sort of handler who’s managing that I think there’s some real plausible deniability there, although I think

it's limited because, if player X under that player's handle on Twitter tweets something out and they say, 'Oh wait, wait, wait, I didn't do that, my manager did it,' well then I expect that manager's going to be fired or I expect there will be some fallout.

Editor C said he and his writers have used social media such as Twitter to mine for story ideas, whether or not a tweet ends up being cited as a source in the final article. He explained:

I think good stories and story ideas can come from anywhere including athletes' tweets, and often do... I don't know that we're monitoring and encouraging [beat writers] to chase after tweets that we know of. While we do have periodic meetings and a weekly conversation right around from where I'm sitting on features and enterprise stories that we plan out for the Sunday sections or 1A page, it's pretty fast moving, so I can't tell you that I'm actively saying, 'Hey, heads up for this good story idea here on Twitter that I monitored on my Pele Twitter account.'

### **Twitter as a Gauge of Public Opinion**

The textual analysis also revealed instances when the Twitter feeds of athletes were used as a measure of public opinion of that athlete and/or of public support for their perspective on an issue. On January 3, for example, *The Globe* referenced the Twitter feed of former Boston Red Sox (MLB) player and radio announcer Jerry Remy and used it to offer perspective on Remy's engagement with the public at the time the article was published. Remy stopped working Red Sox games after his son was arrested on drug and murder charges. The article mentioned that Remy "made an occasional comment on his Twitter account (he has more than 430,000 followers), but most of the Twitter postings are made by

his business partner, John O'Rourke.”

In a January 15 article published in *The Dallas Morning News* print editions, it was reported that, “players have taken to Twitter to praise the hire [former Dallas Cowboys assistant Mike Zimmer as head coach by the Minnesota Vikings] and talk about how it is long overdue.” Twitter was used here as an indicator of opinion on the hiring within the sport. The article did not cite specific tweets in the print or online versions.

On January 29, a pre-Super Bowl feature in *USA Today* on Seattle Seahawks wide receiver Golden Tate noted that the player “has more than 170,000 followers on Twitter” and characterized this as the basis for stating that the player has “bonded” with Seahawks fans, using his Twitter feed as a source of perspective on public opinion. The feature was given longer treatment online (where space isn't an issue), and the online version cited the player's exact number of Twitter followers: 170,123.

Finally, on January 31, an article in *The Dallas Morning News* on the retirement of Texas Rangers baseball player Michael Young noted that “across Twitter, former teammates from Mark DeRosa, Frank Catalanotto and A.J. Ellis and fellow competitors such as Cleveland's Jason Kipnis all chimed in with praise for Young”—with Twitter serving as perspective on sentiment within the sport. However, no specific tweets were cited.

Reporters and editors interviewed for this study were not asked specifically about this aspect of Twitter's role as a news source; however, respondents alluded to Twitter's value in this regard in their answers to other questions. From the reporters' perspective, Basketball Writer A's view was fairly representative. He said:

The NBA has really pushed social media. I think the league has a larger presence on Twitter than even the NFL, even though the NFL is so much bigger. All the fans are

highly tuned in to Twitter and all the players know that and all the players' agents and marketing reps know that and it's the best way for players to reach their fans is first person through Twitter... The players are the stars of the NBA. The teams are the stars of baseball and football.

On the editor's said, Editor B noted:

I think the point is that if you want to know what people are saying, thinking, and doing, you understand that Twitter is a place where... people... express themselves and tell the world what they're up to and what they're doing with their time and sort of what's going on in their lives.

### **Interview Subjects' Views on Factors Contributing to Twitter's Use as a Source**

Reporters interviewed for the study were asked if their use of Twitter as a news source had increased or decreased in the 12 months leading up to their interview.

Interestingly, all of them noted that their use of the social media platform in this manner had remained the same over the past year.

Each of the beat writers and editors was then asked about several factors that might influence their decision to rely on Twitter as a news source. The first of these was deadline pressure. An example of this might include instances when a source is unavailable for interview on deadline; in these cases, a tweet may be used to represent a quote.

Most of the writers interviewed said that deadlines led them to rely on Twitter for quotes and/or information in situations where, in the past, they may have had to simply tell readers that sources were unavailable at press time, or perhaps delay filing a story at all. Football Writer B was one of the few who did not cite deadline pressure as influencing his use of Twitter as a news source. He noted, "I don't think it has to do with the timeline so

much, although if somebody hasn't commented on something that's a big story and all of a sudden they tweet something, you're probably going to move quickly on that." Hockey Writer A, meanwhile, added, "I feel the urgency but I try not to get into it, so I consider myself a little bit more cautious and (deliberate) that way. I wouldn't really feel comfortable going the Twitter route with anything."

Baseball Writer B said that he tries not to use Twitter for quotes, even under deadline, noting:

It's a last resort if I've got to opt to that to confirm something. I'd rather get it and then blog it and then might say, you know, it was first reported on Twitter. We're pretty good about giving credit where it's due when it comes to breaking news on that.

However, Football Writer F represented the perspective of most beat writer respondents when he said:

[My editors] understand that from an immediacy standpoint sometimes that is the only quote you'll be able to use and since it's public, it's certainly better than not using any quote at all. They would obviously prefer and would want to give our readers something more expansive than what you could send in 140 characters, but when you're talking about a retweet and just getting up a blog post, there's no concern whatsoever about using it in that setting...

Hockey Writer C was also representative of the segment of writers interviewed who see an application for Twitter as a source when on deadline. He stated, "If someone has sent a tweet out, it's a convenient way of quoting him. It's deadline pressure I guess, sure. You may not get a call back before deadline but you have a tweet." Added Baseball Writer F:

If a story breaks late and you have no other way of reaching them, then you quote from Twitter, but if you can talk to someone it's always better [I've only used Twitter] when a story breaks at 11:30 [PM] and I can't get anyone on the phone. Hockey Writer D noted that this reliance on Twitter is different for online (blog or social media posts) versus print deadlines. He said:

I'm one of the few people who cover the team on a regular basis, so I've almost always reached somebody. But when a tweet comes out that might be controversial, you might pull from it immediately online and want to get it out there as quickly as possible on the blog or even on my own Twitter account; then, if I'm writing for the newspaper, I'm going to try and get hold of that person. I've had pretty good success. I mean generally speaking, if there's something that's going on, I can get a reaction from the GM or the coach or the player fairly quickly.

The sports editors were asked about their views regarding the use of tweets in place of quotes in stories when an in-person or phone interview was not possible under deadline. In general, the responding editors believed the practice was not ideal, but still acceptable. Editor D noted:

It's not our first choice. Our first choice is still to interview people directly, either in person first, phone second, and then we discourage e-mail or Twitter exchanges as interviews. But we're not foolish enough to think that we can eliminate them because a lot of people communicate that way, including the owner of this newspaper. You're going to miss things if you do that.

Editor A added:

It's certainly a necessary evil. If you have a time issue and what someone has said on

Twitter is your only way of getting that information, then I think we could use it, as long as we're assured that it is that person's Twitter account—obviously we insist that [our reporters] go to lengths to know that... We'll frequently post items on our sports blog during the day that are based on tweets and that may not be reported as fully, but generally for the paper we always try to flesh it out.

Reporters were also asked if pressures to beat (or “scoop”) the competition on a story led to them to rely on Twitter as a source for an athlete quote and/or news item. Several writers acknowledged that this was indeed the case. Hockey Writer D, for example, said:

I think it's huge. We're battling against the athlete and the teams now who both want to use Twitter and social media to, I won't say control the news, but to get their message out there and then two, the abundance of online sites, whether that's Yahoo! Sports or whether that's a fan website or ESPN, [they're] out there too and they're reacting to everything immediately. You know, they don't print anything, they're all online and so if they're reacting to a tweet immediately, then I think there is a pressure on us to react to a tweet as quickly as possible.

Several of the editors interviewed also acknowledged that the use of Twitter as a news source enabled their papers to scoop the competition on significant stories. Editor D said, “We're interested in getting it first and getting it up first with the addendum of saying that we want to be right most of all.”

Editor C also acknowledged this important factor in the use of Twitter, but emphasized accuracy in his response. He said:

Part of the big newspaper or media company debate these days circles around getting it first or getting it right and I think we're all coming to realize that you're not always

going to get it first but you better get it right as opposed to getting it wrong. I think it's [more of] an access problem. I think that more and more teams and leagues are limiting access... so with athletes breaking their own news and engaging in their own dialogue... more news is being broken and more things that are newsworthy are appearing on Twitter and that is the primary reason that there's more activity and that it's more of an evolving thing.

Finally, reporters were also asked if “economic pressures”—cuts to travel budgets, for example—led them to rely on Twitter as a source more frequently. All but three of the reporters interviewed said this was not the case, with most of them citing the fact that as beat writers for large, metropolitan daily newspapers, that expenses related to covering their beats have not been affected to such an extent that they had to rely on social media in place of a phone call or travel to cover an athlete/team in person. Football Writer F, for example, noted, “The economics of covering the beat itself [are not an issue] because if someone is tweeting something I'm texting them, calling them...”

Hockey Writer D, though, acknowledged that these issues may be a factor on other beats—and that they may be on his in the future. He said:

I'm almost always with the team so I've been fortunate in that regard. [But] the way [my paper] cover[s] college football guys have to jump from team to team to team. And so our college football reporter may be in [one place] when something huge breaks with [another team], and he's going I think to have to use Twitter in that regard. I don't think there's any other answer to that. And that is directly because we don't have the reporters to cover every single team in the [local area]. So yeah, I can definitely see how economic pressure could be an issue in using Twitter as a reporting

tool as opposed to actually getting the people on the line.

Baseball writer B added:

I've worked at small papers and I know what it's like to not have the resources to go down and report news directly. So I think it's a very, very, very valid question... especially in these economic times. I see it now with people that used to go to spring training that no longer do, or they're limited to maybe a week or so.

With regard to economic issues—such as cuts to staff and/or travel budgets—leading to increased reliance on Twitter, the editors interviewed said that wasn't the case at their newspapers. Editor D was definitive: "I would say the answer is no. No correlation." Similarly, Editor E said, "We're fortunate to have maintained our sports staff. We cover all the major beats and stories the same way, with the same amount of people we have."

However, others were more equivocal. For example, Editor A said:

That may be the case someplace. We're one of the fortunate papers, we've still got a pretty vibrant news-gathering group and stories that we are interested in, we can put people on. We don't have the staff that we had 12, 15 years ago, but we've still got enough people working here so that if something happens with one of our major beats, we can put somebody on that and get the original reporting that we want to get. Now I know that there are a lot of papers around the country [that] have been less fortunate even than we have been and have been really hammered and if they're trying still to be in the game, I can certainly see where you can get caught short and just not have the resources to flesh something out the way you'd like... but I think in the industry as a whole, people regard Twitter for what it is, which is a very important kind of tip tool, where you can get a feeling for something that may be happening and

I think most people still use it as a jumping off point to get something more...

### **Twitter and source credibility.**

In an attempt to assess participating journalists' thought process with regard to the selection of Twitter as a source—and the determination of its credibility as such—respondents were asked questions about how they select which athletes' Twitter feeds to use as sources and how they determine the credibility of the feeds as sources. Respondents were also asked how they address the issue of athletes using “surrogates” (Marwick & Boyd, 2011)—agents or publicists—to manage the feed, as this speaks to the issue of source credibility as well.

Baseball Writer B spoke for a number of respondents when he said:

My feeling is that it's his account, he's accountable for his words, his actions. It's the same when a person responds via e-mail. I mean there's always the outside chance it's somebody writing the comment but it's their e-mail account, I just state that so and so wrote in an e-mail.

Of importance to all of the reporters and interviewed was the issue of verifying that Twitter accounts actually are the accounts of the athletes they purport to be and that it is indeed the athletes themselves who tweet from that account. Basketball Writer D said, “Many of [the players] have verified accounts, which gives you a little bit better sense I guess that what information is coming from that account is authentic.”

Notably, none of the writers interviewed said they had accidentally quoted from a Twitter feed that was not operated by the athlete they were attempting to quote. To avoid this, a few of the writers interviewed said they have contacted Twitter directly to verify accounts, while most said they relied on the athletes themselves—or their teams—to verify

the accounts. For example, Football Writer E noted, “I think that Twitter does a good job of confirming that people are who they say they are.” According to Baseball Writer A, though, the team he covers will often verify a player’s account. “The PR guy knows,” he said. Similarly, Baseball Writer E noted, “[The team has] have been pretty proactive in terms of verifying if the guy’s on Twitter and chasing down when it’s not.” Added Basketball Writer A, “I just ask the players.”

Beat reporters interviewed for this analysis all said they were aware of athletes using surrogates (i.e., agents and or publicists) to manage their Twitter feeds and most said that they relied on their instincts to determine which tweets originated from the athlete.

Basketball Writer C noted:

That just comes with feel, and we do tend to say ‘so and so said on his Twitter account, or the Twitter account for [Player X] said...’ [to address that]. When it comes to a guy like [Player X], I’ve covered him for 10 years. I know what he says in person and it’s easy to see which of his tweets are an extension of him, especially the frustrating ones where he’s angry at the team or at something he did in the game, and it’s also similarly easy to see which are the ones put out by his publicist. Appearances at Nike stores, stuff that’s just littered with other people’s Twitter handles that [he] wouldn’t in a hundred years know... So many players have Twitter handles that are far from rational beings so that’s obviously a publicist tweet. But when it’s just a human, for lack of a better word, tweet, then I know it’s [the athlete].

Football Writer B’s response was representative of those of many of the study subjects’ when he explained:

[To me] it’s just like a [formal] statement. I mean there’s plenty of times I read

statements that teams e-mail out on behalf of owners or players or whoever and I go, ‘There’s no chance in hell this guy said that,’ but it’s a statement that’s attributed to him. Similar sort of a thing with a tweet, whether the person actually conceived of that tweet and typed it into their phone themselves or if it came through an intermediary, it’s being presented as their words.

Football Writer C agreed, noting:

Our general philosophy is if it’s a verified Twitter account... even if it might be someone else sending the message, they’re sort of under their ownership. You can certainly tell at times, obviously there are PR tweets that come across promoting an event that you can tell are often from the public relations person that has access to that athlete’s Twitter feed, so you’ll use those sparingly...

Again, most of the writers interviewed reported that neither their newspapers, nor their section editors, had communicated specific policies to them with regard to verification of Twitter accounts and/or the origin of tweets. For example, Basketball Writer D said that his paper had “no protocol” and that he made his decisions on whether or not to cite a Twitter account “based on feel.” And Football Writer F said, “To my knowledge there is not a policy at the paper. If [there] is, it hasn’t been shared. I think the feeling is, ‘use your judgment on this and they’re going to be responsible for it. A lot of times, if there’s any sort of significant news, I’ll run it by someone else first and get someone else to corroborate it. There are probably no hard and fast guidelines that I know of, but if something is out of the norm or if you’re suspicious of it or if you have reason to be suspicious of it from a personal standpoint I would never do it.” Similarly, Basketball Writer B noted, “There’s no policy in place.”

Most of the writers indicated that their editors simply trusted their judgment. For

example, Hockey Writer B noted:

If a guy's had a fairly established account, you just have to exercise common sense. It's not like they don't know that reporters are following them and are going to use that if they say anything wild, so I think you have to exercise the same cautions you would if you got an e-mail, where you have to survey the situation, does it seem likely that the guy sent it and so forth.

Although the editors were not expressly asked about policies with regard to verifying the authenticity of tweets, or whether an athlete's account was actually operated by a "surrogate" (e.g., agent or publicist), several volunteered their views on the subject in response to other questions. Editor B, for example, said that his section had no formal policy on the matter, but that athlete's tweets were evaluated on a case-by-case basis. He explained, "Do we know that person to be an avid tweeter or not? It's sort of what do we know about this person from our daily job, from our daily encounters because we're on the beats every day. We don't sort of come and go with these teams; we're always there."

### **Summary: RQ1 Results**

As noted previously, the textual analysis of Twitter's use as a news source by the sports reporters of the eight newspapers included in this study has identified four applications for the social media platform in newsgathering:

1. in place of a quote from an in-person and/or phone/email interview;
2. as the source of breaking news, such as the signing of a new contract or personal announcement (i.e., personal appearance or family news);
3. as the genesis of a story (where a tweet is deemed provocative/controversial and/or offensive); and,
4. as a source of perspective on public opinion (i.e., references to response to certain news events on Twitter).

Appendix D summarizes the use of Twitter as a news source by each of the newspaper sports sections included in the textual analysis.

In addition to confirming these uses for Twitter as a source, interviews with sports reporters and editors from these newspapers identified several factors influencing Twitter's use as a news source, including deadline pressure and pressure to publish stories before the competition. Economic factors were not considered a significant issue in this area by most respondents; however, most acknowledged that this may be due to their presence at large, metropolitan dailies, which, they report, still have more resources than their smaller, regional counterparts. Reporters and editors all cited the importance of verifying the Twitter feeds formally—and of confirming that the feed is not managed by a surrogate—in determining the credibility of Twitter as a news source.

## Chapter V

### **Results: An Overview of the Findings on RQ2**

RQ2 of this study asked: How has Twitter affected the way newspaper sports reporters perceive their roles with regard to disseminating news and information about the athletes they cover? As noted in the introductory section of this paper, sports reporters have historically served a gatekeeping role, as the primary conduit of information between professional athletes and their fans. However, given that social media such as Twitter enable fans to connect directly (at least on some level) with their favorite players, interview subjects were asked what, if any, effect on the gatekeeping function of sports reporters in the dissemination of news and information about the athletes on their beats. The following sections will review responding reporters' and editors' views on this issue, as gleaned from the interview component of this study.

### **Twitter and Gatekeeping: the Reporters' Views**

Interview subjects were not expressly asked about journalists' gatekeeping role in sports reporting, but rather whether the advent of social media had had an impact on sports fans' reliance on newspaper coverage as a source for information on their favorite players and/or teams.

While respondents' answers varied on this issue, all of them agreed that Twitter did indeed have some effect on this dynamic. For example, Hockey Writer B explained:

[Twitter has] allowed... the athlete to tailor his message... Players don't enjoy the journalistic process; the idea of meeting with the press after a game and everything is

not as exciting to them as in the past because they feel like they can get their message out on their own. They don't need us anymore. In other words, they play a game and it's a crazy game and things get out of hand and then they have nothing to say to us. But, they go home, they calm down, they drink a glass of wine or whatever, talk to their wives and then they go on [Twitter] and say, 'I'm sorry that I put my fist through that guy's teeth, I don't know what I was thinking and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.' They have a way then to get it out without having to deal with us.

Baseball Writer E agreed. He said:

It sort of starts to make my job less important when the guys can just go in on Twitter and put what they want to say... I think you need to be able to work with it or you're going to be defeated by it because at some point, and this is happening with I think a lot of guys, they're savvy enough to know that if there's something going on, instead of talking to 20 of us they can put something on Twitter that their agent or somebody may have vetted... So it does take us out of the mix. If I was an agent and I represented a controversial client, I think I'd advise that guy that if you have something to say, say it on Twitter the exact way you want to say it and stop doing interviews because you're going to get in trouble doing interviews; you can't control a lot of times what happens in an interview.

**Twitter: an “unfiltered” resource.**

Interestingly, Football Writer E felt that the social media platform might serve as a way for athletes to provide information to their fans that is not filtered through the lens of the sports reporter, noting:

I think [Twitter is] a way for players to speak directly to the fans. One of the best

NFL players [on Twitter] is Larry Fitzgerald. He shows [his followers] the charitable work that he's doing. He's really well traveled and he tweets pictures from the trips that he takes. I think people get to see better who he is in the way that he wants to be portrayed, not the way that maybe media would have him portrayed. We all do have biases, you know.

Basketball Writer C agreed, noting:

Privately it bothers me that the importance of journalism has decreased a little bit because of Twitter, only because players now realize they can get their side of the story out... they feel like they can get right to fans now, they don't need the media to filter it and what they assume will be a negative filter.

Basketball Writer B believes the direct connection afforded by Twitter makes it more incumbent upon beat writers to maintain a "good relationship" with the athletes on their beats so that they don't "cut us out of the process entirely." He added, "We used to be the eyes and ears. That went away with the explosion of cable television and the Internet, and now we're more contextualizing things rather than just writing straight game stories and stuff."

### **Twitter: reporting or "re-reporting?"**

Several of the reporters interviewed offered their opinions on the validity of reporting what athletes tweet as news when, by its very nature, the medium communicates this information to the athletes' followers in real-time. While several of the respondents admitted that, in the case of Twitter, what they were reporting may have already been made known to interested readers—at least those who follow athletes—hours before their stories were posted online or published in the next day's print edition, they did not see any issues of redundancy. In general, they noted that not all fans follow their favorite athletes on Twitter, and many

don't use Twitter at all. However, this may not be the case for much longer. Data from Alexa.com places Twitter as the 11<sup>th</sup> most-visited web site on the Internet (as of December 2013; Fuchs, 2014).

Basketball Writer D acknowledged this concern when he said:

By the time that information is out there, a lot of [readers] have already seen it [and] get the history and the context [behind it]. On the other hand, there may be people who don't. And then that's where I come in, to explain [it]. Twitter is only 140 characters. If in those 140 characters the athletes can perfectly sum up all the context everyone needs, whether they are or are not familiar with that subject and whatever it is that they tweeted about, then great, but in most instances that's not the case. That's why I try to explain it a little bit just for the common person. That falls under my duties of course.

Baseball Writer E added that he has looked at who many of the people following him on Twitter are following, and that a lot of them don't necessarily follow the athletes. He said, "There do seem to be a lot of people who just follow the beat writers and I think they're like maybe counting on us to, you know, keep track of all of the stuff that they can't keep track of."

Baseball Writer C agreed, noting:

Many people do take [quoting from Twitter] as re-reporting. Certainly in the sports media business it is. I mean, [Player X] reported his opinion [on Twitter] and you're just re-reporting it. But then again I also wonder how much crossover there is. Does the guy who reads my story also follow [Player X] on Twitter and if a million people read the story, how many of those follow [Player X] on Twitter? I can't imagine it's

going to be any significant number.

Football Writer D added:

I think there are some very serious fans that are following everybody, they follow the players, they follow all the reporters, they follow the teams, so they'll probably get information two times and there's nothing I can really do about that. It's the same thing as if I'm in the locker room and if a player says something, I will quote him and I'll put him on Twitter and then I'll use it in a story later or use it in a blog post later, but it's still the same quote. But what I always wonder is, I mean, is it close to a majority or is it kind of like four or five percent, I don't know. Somewhere in there I've got a large group of people that don't know that little bit of information I've got to make sure they're covered too.

**Still at the gates: access and depth.**

Even though Twitter seems to have an undeniable effect on their gatekeeping role, many of the writers interviewed said they believe that most fans want more in-depth information than an athlete's Twitter account can provide. For example, Basketball Writer D noted:

Without question [athletes] have more access and direct access to the fans and likewise, fans have more access and direct access to them. But... the athletes aren't necessarily going to tweet out interesting things about them or about what's going on with them that people might want to know. In terms of getting the general news out and reporting on whatever the situation is regarding that player and that team I still think that we do a service that no one else does and that fans appreciate. I do think that fans can see a little bit more of the personality of some of these athletes and some

of them are very open and honest on Twitter and it makes the connection with fans a lot more real. But... they're not going to tweet out and explain something really rich.

Football Writer C added:

There are more windows [for fans] to look through, with players on Instagram and Twitter and some on Facebook even as well. Fans can get a window into their background and their lives a lot easier these days than they could have five or 10 years ago and don't necessarily rely on the media as much to be the main window into the ins and outs of teams and athletes. But I think there's something about having daily interactions and regular access to someone that allows you to provide more informed perspective or objective perspective... and give an honest and fair assessment of whoever that athlete is. I don't think the concern so much is that the athlete will scoop us because if they're sharing their information... I think the challenge is how do you present it in a way that is I guess productive to your employer in a lot of ways.

Similarly, Baseball Writer A noted:

Twitter is 140 characters and these guys are not particularly good at expressing themselves to begin with. If I'm sitting down with a guy, writing a speech about the guy's life, I can do that, being a professional, much more effectively than he can, especially given that he has this 140 character handicap [on Twitter]. So in that sense it hasn't changed.

And, Baseball Writer F said, "Sure a lot of athletes like social media because they can cut out the middleman, so to speak but I don't think they can say the same thing in 140 characters that I can say in 750 words.

### **Twitter: athletes' PR tool.**

Some of the writers remarked that many athletes on Twitter effectively use the platform as a public relations tool, and that at least some fans see that as well. As Hockey Writer A remarked:

You're not gaining an accurate insight into who they are or what their situation is. I still think the value of a reporter going into the locker room and trying to gain information through images and just reporting, I think you're going to get a more honest viewpoint that way rather than through the filter of a person using Twitter as pretty much a PR tool. Now a lot of that depends on the consumer too. Maybe consumers are satisfied just reading what a player has to say and if that's the case, then so be it. But I think if you're a reader looking for nuance and for perspective, hopefully you're still going to reporters. The thing that separates the reporters, these days, is still the access. I still think there's value of the person who's going into the room and getting the information with interviews and that kind of insight.

If nothing else, the "access" to which many of the respondents referred to as their primary value to fans/readers effectively positions them to provide an eyewitness account that is backed up with the credibility of their newspaper. As Football Writer B explained:

Twitter does remove that filter and allows players to get a message out directly, which I think is a very good thing for players. One thing that you see more and more players do is use that as a tool to make money. You see players tweeting about, 'I just had my whatever brand protein shake,' or, 'Just finished my workout and drinking my Gatorade...' That's not an accident. There's money changing hands there and that's fantastic for... some of these players. I think that there's still certainly a

function [for reporters]... There are still times where people lie, and times where people will only give you one sliver of a story, and that's where as journalists we're supposed to complete the picture and find the other aspects of the story. Just because somebody writes something on Twitter, just like if somebody says it at a press conference, that doesn't mean it's true and 100% correct.

Baseball Writer D agreed, adding, "One thing about we sports writers is we're verified, we're authenticated, our name is behind everything we tweet, we're out there in the public."

Although the sports editors were not asked expressly about the effect of Twitter and other social media on the role of sports journalists as gatekeepers of information regarding the teams on their beats, Editor A addressed the issue a bit in his response to a question regarding the evolution of his Twitter policy. In his view, it seems, sports teams—and perhaps even athletes—are seeking to cut "traditional" sports media (i.e., newspapers) out of the loop for financial reasons. He noted:

I remember people saying well I don't really care what Pete Rose had for breakfast... When Twitter was first coming out there was lack of understanding, number one, on what it was and number two, on how to use it. And I think the evolution has really come on the way people have begun to use it as a tool for disseminating information and certainly the teams that we cover all use it and they're using it to their benefit to get their news out. That's a whole different issue, about how teams want to develop their own news sources rather than having to deal with anybody except their actual financial partners [and] television or radio station.

## **Summary: RQ2 Results**

Interview respondents acknowledged that athletes' use of Twitter as a communication tool does have at least some effect on their roles as gatekeepers of information on athletes and their respective teams; however, there was some disagreement as to the degree of the effect.

Many of the respondents, for example, noted that Twitter enables athletes some degree of message control and allows them to avoid the “journalistic process” that many find distasteful. Others also acknowledged that some could view reporters' reporting of athletes' tweets as “re-reporting,” as the information is effectively already in the public domain.

However, others still also highlighted Twitter's limitations as a source of information, emphasizing that reporters' access and in-depth knowledge of the players and their teams enabled them to provide fans with needed and wanted context that is impossible in the 140-character limits of tweets. Some respondents also noted that not all fans are active on Twitter—yet, anyway—and that not all fans follow their favorite athletes on the social media platform. Finally, some respondents also mentioned Twitter's function as a “PR tool” for athletes and that fans are aware of this aspect of the medium and remain desirous of other, outside perspectives on their favorite players and teams.

## Chapter VI

### Discussion and Conclusions

This study sought to assess how newspaper sports reporters are using the Twitter feeds of sports personalities in their beat coverage (RQ1) and how, if at all, Twitter has affected the way newspaper sports reporters perceive their roles with regard to disseminating news and information about the athletes they cover (RQ2).

With regard to RQ1, all but one of the sports reporters interviewed for this study indicated that they followed the athletes on their respective beats on Twitter, and that they considered athletes' activities on the social media platform part of their beat coverage. The textual analysis of sports coverage in eight daily newspapers and interviews with sports reporters (20) and editors (5) yielded four potential contexts for Twitter's use as a source in sports reporting.

First, an athlete's tweet can be used in place of a direct quote from the athlete when reporters do not have access to that athlete for a phone or in-person interview. For example: An article in *The New York Daily News* on January 9, 2014 quoted from New York Knicks player J.R. Smith's Twitter feed after it was announced that he had been fined \$105,000 by the NBA. The article reported that, "Smith, who did not speak with the news media Wednesday, posted a message on Twitter that read, 'You never know how strong you are until being strong is your only option...'"

Second, an athlete's tweet can be the source of breaking news about that athlete's professional or personal life, particularly late in the daily news cycle. For example: On

January 11, 2014, in print and online, *The New York Times* cited Twitter as the source of breaking news when it reported that New York Yankees outfielder Vernon Wells used Twitter to announce his retirement. The paper reported that Wells wrote on Twitter, “Thank you @Yankees for the opportunity to be a part of such a storied franchise.”

Third, an athlete’s tweet can be the story in and of itself, if it is controversial or provocative or offers the athlete’s opinion on a news item unrelated to his or her sport. For example: A tweet from former Los Angeles Lakers star Magic Johnson was deemed worthy of coverage by *The L.A. Times* and other outlets on January 29, 2014. In the tweet, Johnson listed his “top players in the history of the league” (a quote from the tweet) but left out current Lakers star Kobe Bryant.

In addition to confirming the aforementioned uses for athletes’ Twitter feeds in coverage, the textual analysis component of this study identified a fourth aspect of Twitter’s utility as a news source: as a measure of public opinion on an athlete/team or related news item. For example: On January 29, a pre-Super Bowl feature in *USA Today* on Seattle Seahawks wide receiver Golden Tate noted that the player “has more than 170,000 followers on Twitter” and characterized this as the basis for stating that the player has “bonded” with Seahawks fans.

The reporters and editors interviewed generally supported these uses of the social media platform in their sections’ coverage of the four major sports. The reporters and editors interviewed cited a number of factors influencing their use of Twitter as a news source. A number of respondents noted that the four major sports leagues—MLB, NBA, NFL, and NHL—have placed restrictions on access to athletes, particularly during their respective off-seasons or on non-game days. In these instances, social media may serve as the only way for

reporters to access their subjects' opinions on any news on the beat, as they face deadlines or pressure to post stories online in advance of their competition.

In addition, many of the newspaper reporters interviewed said that they have come to rely on Twitter as a source in the face of competition from online-based and/or non-print (e.g., television or radio) media, which by the nature of their mediums can break news faster than their print counterparts. Many of the reporters interviewed noted that using Twitter as a source for athlete quotes or news enabled them to break news online (via a blog or Twitter) or to file a late-breaking story in time for print deadlines.

In all four applications for Twitter as a news source, verifying the sourced athlete's account is of paramount importance, according to the respondents; respondents also indicated that they clearly sourced Twitter in their stories via attributions, both so that readers would be aware that an athlete's tweet was the source and to protect themselves and their credibility in the event the tweet did not come from the athlete in question (but rather an imposter or surrogate). These findings highlight the fact that sports journalists are still engaged in the source selection—and determination of source credibility—aspects of their gatekeeping roles, even when athletes' Twitter feeds are the sources in question.

Finally, some of the writers interviewed reported that economic factors such as reduced travel budgets or staff cutbacks might play a role in their reliance on Twitter. They noted that the social media platform might enable them to cover a story from afar, if travel or other assignments caused them to be elsewhere. However, overall, from a gatekeeping perspective, such economic factors can for the time being at least, based on interview responses, be viewed as a positive gatekeeping force, as those interviewed for this study reported that travel and staffing budgets still enable them to cover their beats via more

traditional means (i.e., in-person and/or phone interviews).

The responding sports editors indicated that they follow the athletes in their local markets on Twitter and encourage their writers to do the same—and to report on any “newsworthy” tweets. However, their responses with regard to editorial policies on the use of Twitter as a news source differed significantly from those of the responding beat writers, most of whom reported that their editors had no specific rules in place. Although the editors, in general, were not specific in describing their policies during the course of their interviews, they did indicate that they communicated to their staffs their desire to essentially source athletes’ tweets only as a fallback option, when other sourcing is unavailable (on deadline in particular), and to clearly delineate Twitter as a source in any article where it appears as such, so that readers are aware where the information came from; the editors interviewed also indicated that they also instructed their writers to take steps to ensure that any athletes’ Twitter accounts cited in their reporting are verified, although only one of the reporters interviewed acknowledged that he was aware of such a policy at his newspaper. Interestingly, the responding editors don’t believe their policies with regard to the use of Twitter as a news source have evolved over the past year, as the social media platform has grown as a cultural phenomenon.

Although this study assesses Twitter’s use as a news source by only a handful of reporters, from only eight print outlets, it is worth noting that most of the beat writer respondents indicated that they have received no direction from their editors with regard to this application for the social media platform. In fact, most of the reporters interviewed said they are unaware of any editorial policies governing Twitter’s use as a news source at their newspapers or within their sections. Both sets of respondents said they believe it is important

to make readers aware that information has been taken from Twitter; however, the textual analysis portion of this study revealed inconsistencies in how tweets are cited, both in print and online, in apparent contradiction to the comments of the respondents.

As social media's use continues to expand—among athletes and their fans (i.e., the readers of newspaper sports coverage)—it is advisable for editors to develop specific, formalized guidelines with regard to verifying the authenticity of athletes' Twitter accounts and/or tweets, appropriate uses for Twitter as a source, and appropriate citation protocols for when Twitter is used as a source. Based on the aforementioned findings, there are several aspects of Twitter's use as a news source that should be addressed by formal policies.

For example, as all of the reporters and editors interviewed for this study agree that quotes from face-to-face and phone interviews are preferred over those taken from athletes' tweets, any formal policy should stipulate that tweets may only be used in place of quotes when an interview is impossible due to publication deadlines (either online or print). Editors can make exceptions to this policy on a case-by-case basis if they feel that waiting for a direct quote from the athlete may compromise their section's ability to break news before their competition, or if a face-to-face interview requires the reporter to travel and incur unbudgeted expenses as a result.

In addition, formal Twitter sourcing policies should define appropriate attribution procedures when tweets are quoted and/or used as the source of breaking news. These attributions should make it clear that an athlete's Twitter account was used as the source of information and, ideally, explain and/or define any acronyms, abbreviations, colloquialisms, and/or slang terminology used in quoted tweets. Whether or not reporters/editor have corrected any spelling and/or grammatical errors in quoted tweets should be noted as well

(the formal policy should also indicate whether or not the paper will correct such errors). Finally, although it will add to the word count of articles using Twitter as a source, attributions should also include a brief description of Twitter for readers who may not be familiar with the platform. Such a description could read as follows: Twitter is a social media site that allows users to transmit messages of 140 characters or less to those who follow them. This descriptor should also indicate whether or not the newspaper has corrected spelling/grammatical errors or published tweets verbatim, and also define any acronyms or colloquialisms used in quoted tweets (i.e., “GOAT”).

Section policies on Twitter’s use as a news source should also formally define the circumstances under which an athlete’s Twitter feed can serve as a trigger of a story. Ideally, reporters and editors would come to a consensus as to what sort of tweets would be deemed newsworthy and the proper way to present them in coverage. The scope of this policy would, of course, depend on the overall tone the newspaper is striving for, and may differ among broadsheets and tabloids, for example. In this aspect of Twitter’s potential use as a news source, editors and their reporters should take into consideration the issue of effectively “re-reporting” what an athlete tweets. Indeed, “newsworthiness” in this context arguably refers to what is of interest to the newspaper’s readership in general, as opposed to loyal fans of the athlete in particular. In theory, this latter group would likely already be aware of the athlete’s tweet because they likely are already following him/her on Twitter, particularly as the social media platform’s place in mainstream culture expands. It is likely that this aspect of Twitter policy will evolve as Twitter’s use becomes more normalized.

Finally, a formal policy should also emphasize that any use of Twitter as a gauge of public opinion should also include a boilerplate descriptor of Twitter for readers who may

not be familiar with the medium. The descriptor suggested above would likely be sufficient. Of course, the policy should also outline whether or not this is indeed a valid application for the platform, given that not all athletes are active tweeters. Does a lack of Twitter presence or activity imply a lack of popularity? Or a lack of athlete-fan engagement? This is clearly up to individual outlets to decide; however, whatever policy is implemented here, it is important that it be applied consistently.

Of course, with regard to all of the aforementioned uses for Twitter as a news source, verifying the authenticity of the sourced athlete's Twitter account is vital and, as such, should be a key component of any formal policy. A protocol for verifying the authenticity of Twitter accounts should also be established and implemented. It is important to remember that this study offers only a glimpse into the policies and practices at a handful of newspapers; however, the apparent disconnect between editors and reporters regarding Twitter sourcing policies—and the apparent lack of formal policies at the newspapers included in the analysis—reveals a potential avenue for further study.

The widespread use of Twitter as a source by the newspaper reporters and editors interviewed for this study seems to correspond with the findings of other recent research on the topic. However, an important consideration as social media's presence in our culture continues to evolve, and journalists struggle with the ethical and professional questions associated with its use in their reporting, is how its use as such will affect the traditional newspaper sports section's role (both online and in print) as a leading source of information on professional sports in the U.S.

On this latter point, the second research question for this study dealt with the issue of Twitter's impact on sports reporters' role as gatekeepers of information for fans of the teams

they cover. Ultimately, the goal of this research was to assess how sports writers assume the role of gatekeepers in deciding what elements of athletes' presence on Twitter is newsworthy—either as part of a larger story (e.g., for use as quoted matter) or as the story itself (e.g., when an athlete's tweet is controversial).

Indeed, with regard to RQ2, all of the reporters interviewed acknowledged that Twitter has enabled athletes to communicate directly with their fans and to “control their message”—a phrase used by several of the respondents—without involving the traditional sports media. However, most the respondents also noted that the limitations of the medium—i.e., 140 characters, and only one perspective (the athlete's)—kept their roles as reporters relevant to the fan/reader. Even so, many of the respondents also admitted that reporting on athlete's tweets effectively amounted to “re-reporting”—at least to the fans who opt to follow the athletes on Twitter. Although it is debatable whether Twitter and other social media have effectively altered the gatekeeping roles for sports reporters to date, it is certainly a consideration as social media's use becomes even more normalized.

Regardless of the way in which an athlete's Twitter feed is being used as a source in reporting, beat writers are still, in effect, serving in the role of gatekeepers of the information in deciding to use the social media platform as a source in their coverage, at least based on the data gleaned in the present study. Shoemaker and Vos (2009, p. 1) write that gatekeeping is:

... the process of culling and crafting countless bits of information into the limited number of messages that reach people everyday, and it is the center of the media's role in modern public life... This process determines not only which information is selected, but also what the content and nature of the messages, such as news, will be.

Certainly, in deciding to report on athletes' tweets, beat writers are establishing—or at least attempting to establish—their newsworthiness. Moreover, as noted in the literature review section of this paper, Shoemaker and Reese (1996, p. 134) describe journalists' gatekeeping role “as a complex series of interrelated decisions made at many levels.” One of those decisions, they write, is source selection. Indeed, it could be argued that reporters are reaffirming their role as gatekeepers in the selection of Twitter as a source in their stories; however, as Broersma and Graham (2012), and others, caution, the social media platform may actually be serving to undermine reporters' gatekeeping role, as the information provided by “sources” on Twitter is already in the public domain before it is reported on in the online or print editions of the paper. A few of the interview respondents acknowledged this “re-reporting” as an issue now, and going forward, as Twitter's place in popular culture continues to expand.

Broersma and Graham (2012) also remind us that all public figures—including athletes—who use social media such as Twitter often favor it over interviews with the press because it allows them to frame their own messages to the general public. Indeed, as noted previously, Hellmueller and Aeschbacher (2010, p. 17) believe social media may be contributing to a downsizing of the “gatekeeping processes that exist in other mass media forms” because celebrities are able to use social media to “guide how the various channels depict them and therefore how the media and public perceive them” (Hellmueller & Aeschbacher, 2010, p. 18). The writers and editors interviewed for this study acknowledge this as a consideration; however, they cited Twitter's limitations (i.e., its 140-character limit) as the primary reason why sports reporters' role as gatekeepers remains in place. Only sports reporters, they said, have the access to these athletic stars to provide interested fans (i.e.,

readers) with in-depth, unbiased perspectives on their performance.

Still, their responses to this line of questioning provide fodder for future research into the potential impact of Twitter—and perhaps all forms of social media—within the context of gatekeeping theory. Without question, as Hutchins (2011) writes, athletes are using social media such as Twitter in attempt to bypass traditional gates and effectively limit their reliance on the sports media to communicate their messages to their fans. While this study attempted to address this issue from the perspective of the journalists potentially affected by this process, it did not address the audience receiving these messages (i.e., readers/fans) and how these attempts to bypass the traditional gates have influenced the relationships between journalists and their readers and athletes and their fans as well as the coverage of news on the beat. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) describe journalists' orientation to their readers as one of the norms that guides the selection of information they allow to pass through the gates. Future gatekeeping research in this area, then, should focus on how athletes' use of Twitter has affected this relationship and assess whether the athlete-to-fan communication afforded by the medium has changed how sports journalists determine what is newsworthy and how the audience perceives their roles as gatekeepers.

This study has several limitations. For example, as this research was a qualitative rather than quantitative study, it was beyond its scope to gauge whether sportswriters' use of Twitter as a source of news and/or information is increasing or decreasing, and as it was focused on the gatekeeping functions of sportswriters it was not designed to provide insight into how readers perceive this application of Twitter in the mainstream press. In addition, although attempts were made to select a representative sample of newspapers' sports sections for textual analysis, this was by no means be a comprehensive analysis of the use of athletes'

Twitter feeds as a news source across all media. As a result, the findings are not generalizable to reflect current patterns in American sports reporting as a whole.

It is clear that further research is needed to fully understand the effect platforms such as Twitter have had and will have on the role of journalism in our society. Does the fact that athletes and other celebrities can now communicate directly with their fans via social media make redundant the role of the traditional (read: print) sports media to disseminate information about them? How do news consumers perceive the role of journalists in the age of social media? These questions are beyond the scope of this study. However, it is hoped that this research at least provides some answers as to how reporters are incorporating information from Twitter feeds into their coverage, and their views regarding the validity of doing so (i.e., newsworthiness). The research also sheds at least some light on how sports editors view the role of Twitter as a source and how it is incorporated into coverage.

As a social media platform, Twitter's role in social communication has grown exponentially, but its role as a source or resource for journalists remains relatively new. Previous studies have noted this application for the medium, but few if any have reviewed specific examples and attempted to contextualize them, as the present study strives to do. The hope is that by highlighting current practice in this area—and the journalistic philosophies that serve as its underpinnings—within eight of the leading sports sections in this country, this study's findings will add to the discourse with regard to social media's validity as a news source in sports journalism and lead both reporters and editors to further consider their positions on this increasingly important issue. As the user numbers indicate, Twitter is here to stay—at least for now. Whether it needs to be, or should be, part of sports reporting within traditional newspapers remains up for debate.

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## Appendix A

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE: Beat Writers

As noted in my email inviting you to participate, this study focuses on the use of Twitter as a news source—or potential news source anyway—in sports.

1. First, for the purposes of background. What team serves as your primary beat, and how long have you been on this beat? What other sports/teams have you covered in the past year?
2. Now, just to get a sense of your own social media presence, are you on Twitter yourself? If so, how often do you tweet—and, how often do you check the tweets of those you follow? (If not, why not?) What is your newspaper's policy with regard to reporters on Twitter?
3. Do you “follow” the Twitter feeds of any athletes, coaches, or anyone else you cover as a sportswriter and, if so, why (or, if not, why not)? What is your paper's policy with regard to reporters following subjects on Twitter as you understand it?
4. If you follow the athletes you cover on Twitter, do you think this changes the relationship or dynamic between you? Have there been instances when an interaction with an athlete and you on Twitter has come up during your time on the beat (please explain)?
5. What is your newspaper's policy—and/or your editor's policy—with regard to reporters' use of social media (Facebook and/or Twitter) for professional purposes, specifically as a news source? How, if at all, have they encouraged/discouraged the use of Twitter as a source for stories or quotes from athletes? What are your personal views on this?
6. What are your views on using athlete's Twitter feeds as the seed for story ideas and/or breaking news items? Have you ever engaged in this practice and, if so, in what context have you used this Twitter-sourced news item?
7. What are your views on quoting directly from the Twitter feed of an athlete, coach, or anyone else you cover as a sportswriter in a story? Under what circumstances, if any, do you see this as a valid approach? Have you ever quoted an athlete's tweet in place of quote from a direct interview?
8. If you have used an athlete's Twitter feed as the source of a story—either for a quote or as the seed for a story—how, if at all, do you verify the accuracy of the tweet or that the athlete is in fact the source of the tweet? Are you aware of that athletes may use surrogates (publicists and/or representatives) on Twitter? If you know that an athlete often isn't the source of the tweets on his feed, does that change the way you may use it in your coverage?
9. Would you say that your use of Twitter as a source has increased/decreased in the past year? If it has increased/decreased, why do you think this is? Have issues such as increased deadline pressure that comes with the need to post stories on the web ahead of the competition played a role in your use of Twitter as a new source? If so, how?

10. Newspapers are of course making drastic cuts to editorial budgets at present, and on the sports beat this has led to reduced travel budgets and fewer reporters on the beat. Have these economic/resource issues played a role in your decision to use Twitter as a news source? If so, how?
11. Finally, historically, fans/readers have historically relied on sports reporters for information on their favorite athletes. How does Twitter change this dynamic, if at all?

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE: Sports Editors

As noted in my email inviting you to participate, this study focuses on the use of Twitter as a news source—or potential news source anyway—in sports.

1. First, just to get a sense of your own social media presence, are you on Twitter yourself? If so, how often do you tweet—and, how often do you check the tweets of those you follow? (If not, why not?) Do you tweet personally or professionally (ie, as the sports editor of -----) or both? What is your newspaper's policy with regard to reporters and editors on Twitter?
2. Do you "follow" the Twitter feeds of any athletes, coaches, or anyone else you cover as a sportswriter and, if so, why (or, if not, why not)? What is your paper's policy with regard to editors following subjects on Twitter?
3. If you follow the athletes covered by your paper on Twitter, do you think this changes the relationship or dynamic between the athlete and the paper? Have there been instances when an interaction with an athlete and you on Twitter has come up during your time as editor (please explain)?
4. What is your newspaper's policy—and/or your policy—with regard to reporters' use of social media (Facebook and/or Twitter) for professional purposes, specifically as a news source? How, if at all, are they encouraged/discouraged to use Twitter as a source for stories or quotes from athletes? What are your personal views on this?
5. What are your views on using athlete's Twitter feeds as the seed for story ideas and/or breaking news items? Has your paper engaged in this practice and, if so, in what context have you used this Twitter-sourced news item?
6. What are your views on quoting directly from the Twitter feed of an athlete, coach, or anyone else? Under what circumstances, if any, do you see this as a valid approach?
7. Has your policy with regard to the use of Twitter as a news source evolved at all? If so, how? Has the demand for publishing online with breaking news increased the use of Twitter in this way at your paper?
8. Finally, what role if any have economic factors such as budget and/or staff cuts played in your Twitter policy? Have you changed your policy because you have fewer reporters on the beat or because travel budgets have been reduced? Or because you feel pressure to scoop the competition and get a story up first, even if it means relying on Twitter as a source?

## Appendix B

### INFORMED CONSENT:

PROJECT TITLE: The Use of Twitter as a Source in Sports Reporting: A Textual Analysis

PARTICIPATION: Phone or in-person interview

I agree to participate in an interview (either by phone or in person) as part of a research study regarding the use of Twitter as a source in sports reporting. The purpose of this research project is to assess how the Twitter feeds of athletes in the four major U.S. sports—baseball, basketball, football and hockey—are being used in coverage of these athletes by reporters for some of the leading newspapers in the country. The goal of the project is to learn how sports reporters view and value Twitter as a news source and how this shapes newspaper policy on its use in this context.

I understand that I am one of many subjects recruited from eight U.S. newspapers—namely *The New York Daily News*, *The New York Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Miami Herald*, *USA Today*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Dallas Morning News*, and *The Los Angeles Times*—and that many of my colleagues have also been invited to participate.

The researcher has informed me that although my comments may appear in the final analysis of the study results, my name will not be attributed to these comments in any form. In addition, the researcher has informed me that my responses to the interview questions will not be shared with any of my colleagues, either those at my newspaper or those at any of the other newspapers included in the study.

Participation in this research is voluntary. The interviews will be audio recorded to ensure that participants' responses are accurately recorded.

## APPENDIX C: Biographical Sketches of Study Participants

### Reporters

**Baseball Writer A** has been covering his beat for seven years. Prior to that, he served as a general assignment sports reporter for another daily newspaper (which was not part of this study) for five years, covering soccer primarily. He is very active on Twitter. He follows all of the players on the team he covers, and tweets daily during their season.

**Baseball Writer B** has been covering the team on his beat for one season, after serving as the beat writer for another professional baseball team for eight years. He tweets 15 times per day, on average, and follows the players, coaches, and executives for the team he covers on the social media platform. He checks the tweets of those he follows “every two minutes.”

**Baseball Writer C** has served as a general baseball beat writer for nine years after covering a single baseball team for the same paper for five years. He is active on Twitter, more so during the baseball season.

**Baseball Writer D** has been covering his beat for 18 years, and baseball for a total of 20 years (he covered another team for two years), all for the same paper. He describes himself as “one of the last holdouts” in terms of his Twitter presence, and says he only became active on the social media platform because his paper requires it. He follows the players on the team he covers, but only has roughly 100 followers.

**Baseball Writer E** has been on the beat for five years. He follows of the players for the team he covers on Twitter, as well as team executives and minor league players under contract with the club. He was on Twitter already when he was hired by the paper, so he is unsure whether his employer requires reporters to be active on the platform.

**Baseball Writer F** has been covering his present beat for 14 years, the past eight with his current newspaper (he worked for the MLB web site previously). He tweets “all the time” on game days and follows all of the players on his beat on Twitter, at least those who are active on the platform.

**Basketball Writer A** has been covering the team on his beat for four years. He has been a reporter for his paper for nine years, covering college and high school sports before landing his present beat. He is still the national college sports columnist for his paper as well. He is very active on Twitter, and has an app on his phone that alerts him when one of the players on his beat sends a tweet. He also uses the platform to contact players to arrange interviews or obtain quotes.

**Basketball Writer B** has been on the beat for 15 years, and has covered the sport for his paper for 20 years, but for one season covering professional football. He has

sent an average of 2,000 tweets per year since the advent of the platform, and follows all of the players of the team he covers on Twitter.

**Basketball Writer C** has been covering the team on his beat for 10 years, after spending roughly 10 years on the hockey beat for his paper. He tweets, on average, three times per day and follows the players on the team he covers on Twitter.

**Basketball Writer D** has been on the beat for 18 months, after covering another basketball team in another city for another paper (one also included in this analysis) for three and a half years. He reports that following athletes on his beat on Twitter has been part of his work of covering the NBA, since the advent of the social media platform.

**Football Writer A** has been working for his paper for 17 years, covering the NFL for the bulk of that period. During the sport's off-season, he also covers golf and "Olympic sports." He is active on Twitter and follows most of the players on his beat on Twitter, focusing on the "key" players—starters and stars.

**Football Writer B** has been on the NFL beat writer for 18 months for his current employer, after serving as the football beat reporter for a radio station—and its web site—for 13 years. He has sent out more than 45,000 tweets, and averages approximately 100 tweets per day on game days and five per day on off days. As he does not cover a specific team, he follows players "he knows" on Twitter, focusing on "star players" or "players in the news at any given moment."

**Football Writer C** has been on his present beat for two years. He covered college basketball for seven years, after covering another NFL team for two years prior to that. He tweets, on average, 10 to 20 times per day, and checks the tweets of those he follows "daily." He follows all of the players on his beat on the social media platform.

**Football Writer D** has been on the beat for 13 years. He is active on Twitter, and tweets five to six times per day during the sport's off-season, and far more frequently during the season. He follows all of the players on his beat on Twitter, but checks some more frequently than others, focusing on players who are more active or known to use the medium to communicate newsworthy information.

**Football Writer E** has been covering the team on his beat for eight years, the past four for her current employer. During the season, he tweets 10 to 20 times per day and follows all of the players on his beat on the platform, though only 15 to 18 of them are programmed into an app on his phone that notifies him when they send out a tweet to their followers.

**Football Writer F** has been working the NFL beat, off and on, for 20 years, the past five consecutively, all for the same paper. He tweets two to three times per day, on average, and follows all of the players on his beat on Twitter.

**Hockey Writer A** has been on the beat for eight years. Although he is active on Twitter—he tweets 10 to 15 times on the days when the team he covers has a game—he does not follow any of the players on his beat on Twitter because “there is nothing on there I’ve seen that will help me in my coverage.” He only became active on Twitter after being asked to by his editors in 2011.

**Hockey Writer B** has been covering the NHL for 28 years for his current newspaper, and 30 years total. He is active on Twitter, tweeting primarily when he has published a new story (either online or in print), but follows only the players he knows are “active” on the social media platform.

**Hockey Writer C** has been on the hockey beat for five years. He does not consider himself particularly active on Twitter; he only posts when he has published a story online or in print, and follows only a handful of players on his beat on Twitter.

**Hockey Writer D** has been covering the NHL team on his beat for 20 years, the past 15 for his current newspaper. He reports that he tweets and checks the tweets of those he follows—including the players on his beat—“almost constantly.”

### Editors

**Editor A** tweets three to four times a day, and uses the social media platform for professional purposes only. All of his reporters have a Twitter account, and he “encourages” them to use Twitter to connect with readers and follow the athletes on their respective beats on the platform. He also follows local professional athletes on Twitter.

**Editor B** reports that he “tweets as myself” but that his job title is “in my handle.” He adds the Twitter is not “as central” to his job as it would be if he were a beat writer. He says that writers being active on Twitter and following athletes on their beats on Twitter is “expected.” He also follows local professional athletes on Twitter.

**Editor C** is not particularly active on Twitter but does monitor the tweets of his reporters (he prefers Facebook). He says reporters on his staff are “strongly encouraged” to be active on Twitter and follow athletes on their respective beats on the social media platform. He follows one prominent local athlete on Twitter.

**Editor D** is active on Twitter and has a screen on his desk dedicated to the social media platform, where he follows prominent athletes, local teams and major sports news outlets and journalists. He does not require his reporters to be on Twitter, but expects them to be, and says he “trusts my people to know that it’s valuable and pick the right people to follow.”

**Editor E** manages three Twitter accounts: personal, sports editor, and newspaper sports section. He does not require reporters to be on Twitter or to follow athletes on

their respective beats, but expects them to do so. He refused to delve into specific section policy with regard to Twitter use.

#### **Appendix D: Summary of Articles Citing Twitter as a News Source**

The textual analysis component of this study revealed that the eight newspapers analyzed published a total of 74 articles that used Twitter as a news source. Of these:

- 29 used athletes' tweets in place of quotes.
- 16 cited athletes' Twitter feeds as a source of breaking news.
- 18 were instances when an athlete's served as the trigger for a story.
- 11 used athletes' Twitter feeds as a gauge of their popularity or public reaction to their comments on Twitter